Telling Our Stories:
Towards an Understanding of Lived Methodism

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By

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Telling Our Stories: Towards an Understanding of Lived Methodism

Graham Edwards

Abstract

This thesis argues that a thorough understanding of Methodism must attend to the lived experience of Methodist people, expressed within Methodist church communities. I use narrative research methods to show the nature of local Methodist identity. This research was conducted using group interviews with participants from three Methodist churches in West Yorkshire. In analysis of these interviews, a 'narrative of place' is revealed: this is how participants talk about the experience of their church's 'space' and make sense of their belonging. It communicates a shared sense of identity in each context. Through the narrative of place, I identify the shared experience of 'lived Methodism' that reflects my participants' belonging within a Methodist church and within that tradition.

In 1932, three independent Methodist church groups, each with their own practical and theological emphases, united to form The Methodist Church of Great Britain. The contemporary Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place as a 'wide' church, accepts a diversity of practice. Therefore, attempting to define Methodist identity can be problematic. This thesis argues that Methodist identity is not merely given to the church by the Methodist Connexion, or as a function of meeting in a Methodist building, instead it is appropriated and lived locally.

A series of two group interviews in three Methodist communities generates the data recorded in the form of transcripts. Using a narrative research methodology to interrogate this data, I expose the narrative of place and its three core emphases, these show how lived Methodism is revealed in my work. Initially, *place and community* demonstrates how community is formed locally. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, I argue that the language of place and community functions in setting the boundaries of that particular group in both conscious and unconscious ways. The community thus governs its practice and ecclesial identity. Secondly, *place and memory* is outlined. In the three church narratives, memory is used to claim validity for the current expression of the community, and to articulate the values the community wishes to highlight. These two areas highlight how the local churches own and understand their identity, leading finally to an analysis of *place and tradition*. This demonstrates an understanding of what it means to be a Methodist church. There exists a local tradition focussed on 'being the church here and now', which is fed by a received tradition mediated by those who are part of a broader Methodist narrative. The interface of these two modes of tradition creates a contextual Methodist tradition in each setting. I argue that it is here that a rich understanding of Methodism exists.

Methodism is not a gift offered to a community, but a lived reality, claimed and valued by those who tell its story. The local narrative of place allows the lived experience of Methodism, in local church communities, to be heard and understood.

Summary of Portfolio

The portfolio preceding this thesis demonstrates how my research developed throughout the Professional Doctorate programme. I began with questions about the nature of the church which emerged from my personal experience and professional context as a Methodist minister. Specifically, given the plurality of the church, I questioned whether an objective understanding of 'church' was possible, or if the context of a church shaped its understanding and articulation of its identity.

In my literature review, I began by examining the nature of 'normativity' in practical theology, considering the cycle suggested by Rick Osmer (2008), in which he argues that a practitioner seeks a 'normative perspective' when considering their response to theological and practical questions. Other scholars (Green, 2009; Lartey, 2000; Leach, 2007) suggest different models for seeking new practice or 'norms'. However, these are informed by the context rather than attempting to present objective certainties. These contributions led me to consider differing understandings of the nature and purpose of the church. In this section, I argued that any understanding of 'church' is partial and provisional. Through their lived experience, Christian people reflect on and review their understanding of church, enabling contextual ecclesiologies to be constructed and narrated.

In my publishable article, I continued to explore questions about the nature of the church. I suggested that an understanding of the church as a 'liminal community' illuminates the way in which the practice of two or more churches can differ significantly, while both claim to be part of 'the church'. I argued that, at its heart, the church is a liminal community (in the world, yet not of the world); the way a church describes itself and its practices are the outworkings of that liminal experience in the concrete reality of its local context.

In my research proposal, I focussed specifically on the context in which I was working as a Methodist minister, asking how three different churches claimed a shared Methodism. I developed a methodology to allow members of these church communities to construct narratives together, with the aim of interrogating these. My research question developed as I recognised that the narratives formed revealed an account of my participants' lived experience in community, and furthermore, their lived Methodism. This led me to explore how lived Methodism could be conceptualised, and articulated from these narratives.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: METHODISM, A NEW NARRATIVE?

In this thesis, I argue that a careful understanding of Methodism must pay attention to the lived experience of Methodist people, articulated in local Methodist narratives. I suggest that Methodism does not exist primarily in shared doctrinal statements, or a collection of common practices, rather Methodist identity is revealed in the experience of lived Methodism. I argue that the narrative of place signifies the shared experience of lived Methodism. By listening to the stories from members of three Methodist churches in Yorkshire, I expose the narratives in which their identity is held and expressed, to articulate a shared way of communicating in each context; I refer to this as the narrative of place.

The Methodist movement, which became the Methodist church, began in the work of John Wesley (1703 – 1791), yet, from that point, defining the nature of Methodism has proved somewhat complicated. Since its beginnings in Wesley and his work, Methodist theology and practice has evolved as a response to the changing culture around it, and therefore understanding its place and form within a particular context is necessary in any attempt to define it, as David Carter (2002, p. 150) notes. In this thesis, I contend that 'Methodism' exists in the lived experience of Methodist people: what I would term 'lived Methodism'.

This chapter will begin by exploring how this research emerged from my own history and practice and clarify my question of Methodist identity. To address this, I use a narrative methodology, arguing that narrative and identity are inextricably linked and clarify my understanding of these terms. Finally, I provide an overview of this thesis and the development of my argument.

1.1 Experiencing Methodism.

For as long as I can remember, I have been involved in the life of the Methodist church. I was born into a family who attended the local Methodist Church; my parents fulfilled many different roles including Sunday School Teacher, choir

member, and Property Steward. As I grew up, I was involved in the Sunday School and youth group, I became a member of the Methodist church and regularly attended church services.

As I reflect on my experience of this church, I am unable to locate a moment where I realised that 'our' church was a 'Methodist' church. In the same way, I cannot remember anyone in the life of the church ever articulating what it meant that 'our' church was Methodist, or what was different about 'our' church compared to other local churches. My memories of our family church are focussed on the practices of that community and the relationships formed and sustained in that place. I remember friends in various groups, ministers of the church, and those who I interacted with over a number of years. I can equally remember acts of worship and social events in the life of the church, but nothing that was, to me, distinctly Methodist.

Methodist churches are grouped into 'circuits' which are made up of several churches spread across a geographical area. Circuits have a number of ministers who may be focussed on particular churches, but to some extent work across the whole circuit. The church my family attended was slightly unusual by Methodist standards, as it was a 'single station' circuit. This meant in 'our' circuit there was one church and one minister, therefore I did not appreciate that other local churches also understood themselves to be Methodist.

In 2002, I began working as a Lay Worker in a large suburban Methodist church which was part of a circuit of nine churches. During this time, I was struck by the way the churches of the circuit responded to each other. They recognised each other as part of a Methodism that was wider than their local church: for instance, they had circuit acts of worship, and would attend meetings with people from different churches to work on circuit projects. Despite this apparent sense of unity, the churches in the circuit were still very different from one another. The churches differed in the sizes of their buildings and congregations; in the style of their acts of worship (which ranged from singing hymns with organ accompaniment to 'action' songs using CDs) and in the activities that took place within each church community. These churches shared a Methodist identity, yet there was a clear sense of prioritising the local

context in each church. My experiences demonstrated that Methodism looked different in each context. Over the next five years, I worked in two other Methodist churches, one in a small rural village and the other in a small town; in these churches I continued to reflect on the way I was experiencing Methodism.

In 2008, I became the minister of four Methodist churches in Yorkshire. Three of these churches are the focus of this study and are anonymised in this work, as are their members. Sonning Methodist Church is a medium-sized church with about seventy members, it operates with several committees that deal with the day to day running of the church and are overseen by the formal decision-making body which is the Church Council. The church draws inspiration from a variety of sources as it constructs acts of worship. Sonning Methodist church is financially secure with a strong weekly congregation. Eltham Avenue Methodist Church is in a small village, it has twelve members, and is part of the urban sprawl connecting several towns together in West Yorkshire. The church offers a formal style of Sunday service, with hymns and readings. The members seek to form a consensus: the Church Council retains oversight, but in practice, it affirms the consensus that has been sought before it meets. Ripley Methodist Church is a 'Fresh Expression of Church'. The Methodist building was converted into a soft play area with a café ten years ago, it operates as a Christian business from Monday to Saturday. The church has one act of worship each month, designed for families to attend together, this is not considered a 'traditional' act of worship. Ripley Methodist operates under the banner of 'The Ripley Playhouse', which has a management committee to deal with the day to day operation of the project.

These three churches are part of the British Methodist Church and the same local Methodist circuit in West Yorkshire. They are, therefore, 'officially' Methodist, and each claim a Methodist identity, however their expression of 'church', and indeed '*Methodist* church' is quite different. Over recent years membership of The Methodist church has declined, and a significant number of churches have closed.[1] It seems to me, therefore, that paying attention to the experience of place will

[1] In 2011 there were 5162 (TMCP, 2010) Methodist churches, by 2017 this number had reduced to 4512 (TMCP, 2017d).

illuminate the nature of lived Methodism, and the challenges it brings to the church. Methodists share a particular identity, yet this identity is not only articulated in shared practices, policies or styles. What it means to be Methodist is revealed in the way these churches understand themselves through their lived experience. In this thesis, I outline the 'Methodism' that these churches share, through exploring the narratives created by Sonning Methodist Church, Eltham Avenue Methodist Church, and Ripley Methodist church in group interviews.

1.2 Narrative and Identity

The identity of a community or individual is held and communicated in narrative form, and an exploration of those narratives has the potential to illuminate the experience of that individual or community in new ways. Attending to these narratives, as Christopher Brittain notes, offers the opportunity to understand "the church's present life" (2012, p. 137). When a narrative is expressed or reflected to a community or individual it allows it to be (re) assessed, and for new practices to begin. Therefore, the telling of stories affords a greater understanding of where those stories fit in the world. In this work, I am concerned with articulating the narratives of three Methodist communities to begin a critical reflexive process which asks what it is to be Methodist. Therefore, in this section I will outline the understanding of narrative and identity I adopt in this study.

'Story' refers to "all articulations of experience that have a narrative element" as suggested by Carol Christ (1995, p. 1). My focus is on the "life stories" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, pp. 232 - 233) individuals or communities tell about themselves. These stories may be personal or may be shared with others; they are revealed in a variety of ways, including written, spoken and lived. Stories are an essential part of being human, they make sense of the world, and situate people in relation to it, as Jonathan Gottschall (2012, p. xiv) notes, "we are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories". Furthermore, Gottschall (p. 177) argues that story "nourishes our imaginations; it reinforces moral behaviour; it gives us safe worlds to practice inside. Story is the glue of human life - defining groups and holding them together". Stories hold groups of people together because the central stories they exchange are the way in which their

shared identity is revealed. These stories are formed into narratives, which connect "events of human life, reflect human interest and support our sense-making processes" (Bold, 2012, p. 16). In this way, narrative enables individuals to make sense of experience (Crites, 1971). However, Donald Polkinghorne (1991) argues that this is achieved by discerning a plot within narrative. While this does not mean that narratives provide factual certainty in the stories they connect (Bold, 2012, p. 17), they make sense of those stories within their context. It is important to note where autobiography fits within these descriptions: these are accounts of an individual's life written by the person concerned. They have a narrative quality of their own, yet may be incorporated into the broader narratives of communities (Goldberg, 1991).

This work listens to the narratives of Methodist church communities revealed through a series of group interviews. These narratives are formed by stories and fragments of stories, drawn from the collective memory of those communities and the autobiography of participants. Michael Goldberg (1991, p. 12) points out that "religious convictions which are at the heart of theological reflection depend on narrative for their intelligibility and significance". This is the starting point for my research because narrative reveals the inner life of the church communities, they become what Terrence Tilley calls a "primary way to do theology" (1985, p. xviii) offering theological insight into that life.

As individuals live their lives, they engage in what Steph Lawler calls "autobiographical work" (2008, p. 13), where experience is written into story, story into autobiography, and an 'interpreted narrative' is created by the individual who owns those stories. This influences self-understanding and enables articulation of self in relation to the world and narrative reflection. Paul Eakin takes this further by claiming that narratives are the "primary mode of identity experience" (1999, p. 137). The stories that enable an understanding of self are not held in isolation, rather they involve the whole of an individual's life where they are situated in relation to personal, community and macro networks. In her work, Lawler asserts that the interpretation and re-telling of such stories forms and articulates "how we come to be how we are" (2008, p. 13). It is not the story that reveals identity, but rather the telling of stories to oneself and to others that produces a sense of identity.

Therefore, to access the self-identity of an individual, it is necessary to hear their narrative giving attention both to the private story the individual tells herself, and her 'public' story that is performed and then interpreted by others through her life in the world.

The notion of public and private stories suggests that some stories cannot be told. This may be, at least in part, due to issues of power in the production of the narrative itself as certain stories can only be told at a particular time, due to the way society will hear and respond to them (Plummer, 1995). In my research, the narratives that are told represent the story of a community or individual at a particular time, but these narratives may subsequently be retold, and reconfigured. This does not render the stories obsolete but requires that they are always, to some extent, understood as historically, culturally, and contextually limited. The stories told in my work are within the context of a group interview; when they are told in a different context with different people they may change according to that new context.

In addition to recognising that there are some stories that cannot be told, there are also stories that are untold. Stephen Crites (1971) suggests that these stories operate at a deeper level than those which are told due to their suppression; they act as formational stories. He characterises these stories as 'sacred' holding an individual's sense of self and their particular worldview. He writes:

> [These stories form the] consciousness that projects a total world horizon, and [informs] the intentions by which actions are projected into the world ... the story itself creates a world of consciousness and the self is orientated to it (1971, p. 296).

For Crites, stories that are directly told, heard, or seen are considered *'*mundane'. This is not to imply that such stories are of lesser value or interest, as he is clear that between the mundane and sacred there is "distinction without separation ... all people's mundane stories are implicit in [their] sacred story, and every mundane

story takes soundings in the sacred story" (1971, p. 296). The mundane is the carrier for the sacred and telling it may be an attempt to articulate a sacred story, though Crites acknowledges that this is never "fully successful" (1971, p. 296). In the dynamic of told and untold stories, stories that are told may be the result of the untold. As he reflects on how stories are told, Johann Baptism Metz comments that "the story is not ideologically unconscious of the interest that governs it. It presents the interest and 'tries it out' in the narrative process" (1973, p. 254). The narratives created in forming a sense of identity are affected by the ideological context in which they are written, while the author or authors of the narrative may not be conscious of this ideology; the narrative itself is influenced by its context. It is by exploring the mundane that the 'echoes' of the sacred story may begin to be heard and appreciated, and thus the ideological awareness or intent of the narrative is revealed. An individual or community's narrative, therefore, demonstrates the [current] self-understanding of that individual or community. James Gustafson argues that narrative also conveys the ethical understanding of its author:

> narratives function to sustain the particular moral identity of a religious (or secular) community by rehearsing its history and traditional meanings … [through] participation in such a community, the narratives also function to give shape to our moral character, which in turn deeply affect the way we interpret or construe the world (1988, p. 56).

While he acknowledges the power of narrative in shaping identity, and the dynamic relationship between narrative and ideology, Gustafson (1988, p. 56) notes that narratives are both formed by individuals or communities and have a formative influence on those same groups or individuals, placing a greater emphasis on the individual. Identity narratives locate individuals, illuminating their interaction with their world, but they remain only part of the whole story. Hauerwas and Jones (1997, p. 4) comment, if "identity is fundamentally in narrative form ... then the issues are framed somewhat differently than the assumption that moral integrity is

something shaped by the story of a community". A personal narrative both shapes and is shaped by the life of a community. Narratives, whether mundane or sacred, are constantly challenged, reassessed and rewritten - therefore the sense of identity is produced through this continual process of narrative construction (Lawler, p. 17), and as such it is formed through interaction with or isolation from other people. Producing a sense of identity requires the continual negotiation of the narratives accepted and inhabited, and those which are rejected: this process is "the continual development of new life stories" (Lakoff and Johnson, p. 233).

Identity narratives are dependent on context; different stories belong in different places and with different people. Therefore, there is an element of 'performance' in identity, it does not simply exist; in this way Lawler argues for an understanding of identity as something to be "done rather than owned" (2008, p. 121). In this understanding, identity formation is an ongoing process in which the experiences of life are integrated into the performance of identity to, and with others. Butler (2004) and Goffman (1990) accept that identity is 'performed', but they challenge any perceived distinction between 'being' and 'acting', arguing that the two cannot be separated. Lawler characterises their position as one which accepts that "there is no other way to be than to act" (2008, p. 121), and highlights that both Butler and Goffman recognise individuals can be concerned about the question of the authenticity of their identity (pp. 120 - 121), leaving them confused about their 'true' identity. If identity exists deep within an individual, this "can itself be seen as constituted through the performances all of us enact every day" (Lawler, p. 121). The way identity is articulated is always dependent on its context and it may be understood as intuitive or improvisational, but it remains a response to the 'place' of performance.

The importance of place in self-identity is clear in work of Louis Zurcher (1977), who outlines four modes in which an individual's self-concept is realised: "physical", "social", "reflective" and "oceanic" (1977: pp175 – 222). The research Zurcher conducted used the "twenty statements test" (1977, p. 43), he asked participants from a variety of social contexts to write twenty answers to the question "who am I?". Their answers were then coded into four categories. Participants whose

responses placed them in the 'physical' category tended to understand "the self as a physical entity ... making only indirect reference to interpersonal transitions or identifications with social structure" (p. 175). Participants in the 'social' category "identify self clearly and specifically with institutionalised statuses or roles … the self is involved in structured interpersonal relations including a network of rights and duties" (p. 176). Those identified in the 'reflective' category demonstrate "styles of behaviour which the respondent attributes to himself ... they do not pin the respondent down to specific behaviours" (p. 46). This category is exemplified by responses that are relatively "situation free" (p. 176) reflections on an individual's personality or predilections. The "Oceanic" category is characterised by responses which utilise "no particular context, act or attribute which demonstrates identification with social structure or interpersonal networks, indicating that the self is removed from interactive commitment ... Statements are vague and not differentiating" (p. 176). Here the self may be understood through abstract or transcendent ideas and a mystical or spiritual awareness. This understanding recognises a fluidity in the development of self, which is dependent on context and its influences. A sense of identity is formed through lived experience, but this is necessarily complex; the performance of that lived identity reflects the location of its performance, the influence of role and relationship therein and the effect of that experience. It is, therefore, experience in context that enables an individual to make sense of the world: "the evidence of experience ... reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems (Scott, 1991)". The kinds of experience in each mode allow for different reflections, all of which form an understanding of self in context.

The churches in this study provide a context for identity formation and articulation; in group interviews, participants from these congregations construct narratives within their shared experience. James Hopewell (1987) argues that the particular features of a church community, their "idiom" (pp. 5 - 9), is held and transmitted in narrative form which holds a church community together and enables it to grasp more fully its purpose. This happens

> as the [church] apprehends its corporate experience and as its members communicate their common life and draw resources from the narrative structures of the world. I believe that telling such a story enables a congregation to comprehend its nature and mission (1987, p. 51).

The narratives created by a church community may be considered as whole 'objects' rather than being subdivided into separate categories. Treating the narrative as an object allows for themes within that account to be grasped, and the process of identifying sacred stories to begin. Hopewell does, however, acknowledge the role context plays in forming stories: "congregational communication is seldom propositional. Members are less likely to speak in abstractions than in tales about their collective life" (p. 48). The narrative provides a "temporal form" (p. 51) for the community's shared communication and life which makes sense regarding how events are interrelated over time, and holds the intrinsic sense of self in relation to the context that a community lives within.

In the life of a church community, narratives may vary in their style and presentation, but it is as a community writes, edits, re-writes and owns these, that its sense of identity is revealed. I demonstrate that within the narratives I explore there is a common unifying style that reveals the nature of a local lived Methodism in each community with whom my research engages.

1.3 A local Focus

This thesis focusses on participants from three Methodist Congregations, arguing that the identity they perform is understood through the narratives they construct. I understand lived Methodism as the way a group of people within the 'space' of a church community negotiate their shared identity through the experience of place, and communicate this through narrative. My research enabled groups in each of these churches to articulate a shared narrative in their context, formed from 'mundane' stories. However, analysing them will reveal the sacred formational stories. The sacred stories reveal a Methodist narrative operating in three communities. This is revealed in the shared narrative of place, which is expressed

through themes of community, memory and tradition, emerging from group conversations about the nature of, and their experience of the church. I will interrogate these narratives to understand what makes them, and therefore the churches they emerge from, Methodist. This will enable me to understand the nature of lived Methodism in this context.

1.4 Overview of Thesis

This thesis argues that the narrative of place signifies the shared experience of lived Methodism. Chapter Two considers the way Methodist identity has been articulated and reviews the way commentators and the Methodist church itself have expressed 'Methodism'. Using the concept of lived religion, I suggest that Methodism has been inadequately studied. Lived religion may be understood as the "complex and ever-changing mixture of belief and practices as well as relationships, experiences, and commitments" (McGuire, 2008, p. 185) that represent the way an individual 'lives' in the light of their faith or religion. I will show that Angela Shier-Jones' assertion that Methodism is a "work in progress" (2005, p. 2) does not do full justice to the creative work of Methodist people in context. Instead, I will argue that understanding Methodism as a lived experience brings something new to this area of work. Chapter Three outlines the process I used to access the stories of each church community and to form a narrative understanding of their shared life. I show how I used a narrative research approach to generate and analyse data from a series of group interviews, which reveal the narrative of place and its shape in my research.

Chapter Four begins to analyse the results of group interviews and conversations, showing that in the material from all three research contexts there is a preoccupation with place as a way of understanding the life of the church, and participants' engagement with it. This leads me to outline my understanding of the narrative of place, which is expressed in the themes of community, memory, and tradition. Chapter Five shows how community is expressed in the narrative of place. I use Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990, 1991) concept of habitus to suggest that in these churches, community is experienced as a way of being, particular to their context, in which the 'rules of the game' enable participants to know how to act and respond authentically. This understanding of community is further developed in

creating boundaries, expressed through the phrase “like-minded”, as invitation to become part of the church. The habitus creates a ‘feel for interpretation’, allowing the church to function as an interpretative community to make contextual sense of its developing life. Finally, community is revealed in relationships which feed the life of the church and its habitus. Chapter Six shows how the understanding of community is sustained by an appeal to memory. Memory does not simply allow the church to recollect events, or to transmit theology from one generation to another; it provides an insight into the life of the group within their experience of place. Memory allows participants to show the validity of their church, restoring continuity ruptured by changes in membership over time, and to articulate the values that have supported their collective life.

Chapter Seven identifies how the theme of tradition is worked out through the experience of the church communities. I argue that a new understanding of Methodism must encompass the work and lived experience of Methodist people throughout the Methodist Church. A local tradition in the churches is exposed, this recognises the local experience as a crucial tool in understanding identity, ‘what we do here’ becomes an appropriation of local tradition. The influence of official Methodism is felt in the local churches in the work of those who represent Methodism through their capacity as Local Preachers or Presbyters, these become guardians of the received tradition and its influence. These local and received modes interact to create a contextual Methodist tradition, which allows Methodism to be expressed authentically in the life of the local church. Chapter Eight argues for an understanding of lived Methodism through the themes of community, memory, and tradition, revealed in the narrative of place.

CHAPTER TWO

LIVED RELIGION

In this chapter, I contend that the study of Methodist identity, is illuminated by the concept of lived religion. This is a way of characterising the interaction of belief, practice, and experience in the lives of people of faith. Graham Harvey claims that lived religion is an attempt to "theorise religion not so as to nail down a true representation of static complexities … so as to enrich engagement with living, dynamic, ongoing relationships" (2013, p. 208). While lived religion may be understood as a personal or individual experience, the relationship Harvey highlights takes place within community. Therefore, I argue that it is helpful in understanding the theology and ecclesiology enacted by a local church community. In his reflections on the nature of Christian formation, Roger Walton (2014) suggests that Christians are formed by being Christians, that is, by living their faith in community. It is this lived experience, revealed in practices that sustain community, to which I appeal. As a local church enacts its faith, it forms itself as a community within that context. The church forms (and reforms) itself by being a church, its lived experience reveals its nature, and becomes the locus of its theology and ecclesiology. The privileging of experience as a valid and illuminating heuristic reveals what Robert Schreiter calls a "shift in perspective" (1985, p. 1) where local, contextual and indigenous voices have been given a new priority in theological discourse, as opposed to a search for objectivity.

The term 'lived religion' is used by Meredith McGuire[2] to name the way religion is "experienced in the lives of individuals" (2008, p. 3). Being religious, McGuire argues, is more than a state of mind: it is a framework by which people choose to live their life (2008, p. 12), that is reflected in their practices and enacted beliefs. This thesis is concerned with the nature of Methodist identity and experience, and how that identity is expressed in church groups. By exploring the way communities negotiate

[2] The concept of lived religion is found in the work of Nancy Ammerman (2007), David Hall (1997), Graham Harvey (2013) , and Robert Osri (2002).

their shared experience of religion, I am therefore extending the use of lived religion to encompass the experience of communities and groups of religious believers, specifically those who are part of the three Methodist Churches I have researched. In recognising the corporate experience of lived religion, I will attend to the lived experience of the Methodist churches I have studied.

In this chapter, I outline the challenge of articulating a unified Methodist identity and argue for the importance of lived religion in understanding Methodist communities, and therefore articulating a lived Methodism.

2.1 The Methodist Movement

The Methodist movement began with John Wesley, in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. When Angela Shier-Jones reflects on the impact of this history on contemporary Methodism, she describes it as "a wonderful fusion of passion, calling, ideas, practices, liturgies, and doctrines, most of which have been gifted, begged, stolen or borrowed over time from other Christian denominations" (2005, p. 2). Pinpointing those things, either in practice, theology, or ecclesiology, which are understood as definitively Methodist, therefore, is no easy task.

There have been a number of attempts to define 'Methodism' from scholars and the Methodist Church.[3] However many of these definitions tend to reflect on 'official Methodism' revealed in the foundational documents of the church or the intentional ways the Methodist movement was formed over 300 years. These attempts at definition begin their work looking for overarching narratives that exist in Methodist literature or within published Methodist theology and in doing this they attend to the collective experience of Methodism as a national movement or church. I suggest that they do not pay sufficient attention to the local narratives of Methodist people and churches, where identity is formed and sustained.

The Methodist Church of Great Britain was formed from the union of various Methodist traditions in the early twentieth century. As these merged, a kaleidoscopic mixture of traditions, practices, and ideologies were created. Any

[3] For instance, see: Carter, 2002; Heitzenrater, 1995; Hempton, 2005; Munsey-Turner, 2005; TMCP, 1937, 1999.

attempt to articulate a clear Methodist identity from the history of the movement as it became a church, divided, and reformed will encounter the challenge of its diverse theology and practice. Martyn Percy (2004) maintains that the strength of Methodism lies as a movement within the established church, emphasising a personal relationship with God and the implications of that relationship for holy living; it was and is, he states, best suited as a particular form of spirituality, rather than a denominational group. Here lies the problem in attempting to understand the Methodist movement as 'church', it was never intended to be a church and its engagement with the culture of its time was driven by a pragmatic appraisal of its effectiveness. The beginnings of Methodism were as a movement which privileged experience; I maintain that an appeal to experience, both personal and corporate, illuminates the nature of contemporary Methodism.

The Methodist movement began through the ministry of John Wesley and proliferated in his lifetime. Wesley, born in 1703, was the son of an Anglican priest; he entered the priesthood in 1728 and his formation in the Anglican tradition meant that his theology was a synthesis of a number of influences, as Heitzenrater explains:

> The mediating influence of the *via media* can be seen in his comment that he was 'early warned against laying … too much stress … on outward works, or…on a faith without works, which as it does not include, so it will never lead to, true hope or charity' (1995, p. 35).

Wesley searched for 'true' religion throughout his life, seeking assurance and instructing others in the value of this pursuit. This would ultimately lead Wesley to consider the pursuit of holiness as an essential part of the Christian life; he believed it was the very core of the Christian experience. Wesley's commitment to 'holiness' and his reading of pietists from the 'holy living tradition' led him to the conviction that holiness was an inner reality which was necessarily revealed in the words and actions of a Christian (Heitzenrater, 1995, p. 36). The foundations of the Methodist movement are in Wesley's time as a student at Oxford University, and following

Wesley's 'Aldersgate' experience, its influence increased in his lifetime. The so-named 'Aldersgate experience' was recorded in Wesley's journal as the moment when he asserted "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation" (Wesley, 2007b, p. 103). For many this moment is crucial in understanding Wesley's faith, valuing the experience of a 'personal assurance'. Wesley's spiritual life is best characterised as one of searching, careful reflection and often re-evaluation of previous understandings; indeed Heitzenrater, commenting on Aldersgate, notes that "its spiritual significance rests in Wesley's eventual modification of nearly every aspect of his perception and explanation of the event at the time"(1989, p. 149). Wesley understood that the experience of religion has a powerful effect on an individual's understanding of it, his experience shaping his perception and future actions.

Wesley did not originally envisage the Methodist movement's eventual development into a church in its own right; his concern was promoting 'religion of the heart' or 'true religion' within the Church of England. In his tract, *The Character of a Methodist*, Wesley offered this definition:

> A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;" one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength." God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee my God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!" (2007a, pp. 341 - 345)

In this extract, Wesley demonstrates an understanding of Methodists as those whose religious experience is a directing influence in their lives, and who therefore prioritise that experience as guiding their actions within the church. For Wesley, a Methodist is one who searches for a deeper understanding of God; indeed, this was Wesley's purpose for the movement he initiated. However, as Outler (1964a, p. 19) notes,

when John Wesley does define 'church', he defines it as an 'act', the mission or work of Christian people in the world. This is not a deficient understanding but one which promotes lived region. As Dunning comments,

> Wesley seems to have captured the central emphasis of the New Testament that the church is a community of people called into being by God for the purpose of carrying out His redemptive mission in the world (1987, p. 116).

In Wesley's understanding therefore, theology and action belong together, his Methodism was both theological and practical.

Nevertheless, the Methodist movement developed a church-like structure and emphasis in its societies which were modelled on the religious societies active in London, and classes within these to provide oversight and discipline (Vickers, 2000, pp. 69, 325). Albert Outler comments that while the Methodist movement had the "essence" (1964a, p. 25) of an understanding of itself as church, it "never developed – on its own and for itself – the full panoply of bell, book and candle that goes with being a 'proper' church properly self-understood" (p. 25). By the end of John Wesley's life, relations between the Methodist movement and the Church of England had deteriorated to the point that David Carter describes their relationship as one of "mutual incomprehension" (2002, p. 26) as Wesley had developed administrative structures within his movement which had no direct relation to the Church of England. However, it was when his concern for the lack of ministers in America led him to ordain Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat to organise the American Societies, that he contravened Anglican discipline. Wesley would later set Thomas Coke apart for the American work, effectively ordaining him as "Superintendent"[4] (Baker, 1970, pp. 260 - 282). These ordinations were viewed with suspicion by the

[4] Thomas Coke was ordained as Superintendent in 1784, yet by 1787 he and Francis Asbury had taken the title "Bishop", angering Wesley and creating further distance from the established Church of England (Baker, 1970, pp. 260 - 282).

Church of England, fostering the incomprehension which David Carter highlights. The ordinations Wesley carried out reflect his pragmatic approach within the Methodist movement: his concern for the care of Christians in America drove him to find a solution, his experience driving his practice. Wesley wrote on this issue in 1784

> If any one [sic] will point out a more rational and scriptural way of feeding and guiding those poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it. At present, I cannot see any better method than that I have taken (2007c, p. 252).

Seven years before his death, Wesley had executed the *Deed of Declaration* (1784), which was intended to show how the Methodist societies should be managed after his death. Since its beginnings, Wesley had overseen the Methodist movement, and the Deed of Declaration aimed to ensure that his persona and commitment to the Church of England was continued in 'the legal hundred' who would constitute the governance body of the movement, "The Conference of the people called Methodists" (Vickers, 2000, p. 92). With the institution of the Conference, the Methodist movement was developing an ecclesial character, and from this point, it began to transition formally into a church. The Deed of Declaration offers an important development in Wesley's thought: he concedes at this point that there are not just Methodists, there is also a "Methodism" (Walsh, 1965, p. 278). Albert Outler notes that the "drift into schism was strong, and finally prevailed, reverence for Wesley obscured the fact that when he died, he was the staunchly conformist leader of a nonconformist movement" (1964b, p. 16).

The Methodist movement was developing a life of its own, as a group distinct from the Church of England, yet its identity as 'church' was still in question since there was no formal separation from the institution. Wesley reflected on this issue in his sermon *On Schism*; he writes, "to separate ourselves ... is a grievous breach of the law of love ... the greater the love, the stricter the union" (2007d, p. 406). The decisive break with the Church of England came after Wesley's death in 1791, with

the *Plan of Pacification*, which was agreed in 1795 and allowed Methodist societies to celebrate the sacraments with the consent of the conference and local leaders (Walsh, 1965). While not all societies initially took advantage of this, it signalled that Methodism had accepted its place as a church, with the ability to fulfil all necessary sacramental functions. The *Plan of Pacification* had been precipitated by a conflict concerning the administration of the Eucharist, known as the 'Bristol Controversy'; from this point there would be a series of such conflicts which would ultimately cause groups of Methodist people to form their own churches or 'Connexions', the term which describes groups of churches who were connected to each other.

In his lifetime, Wesley and his influence dominated the Methodist movement in Great Britain; it was his understanding and his theology that both drove the movement forward and held it together. Following his death, Methodists were freed to offer alternative interpretations and began to adopt differing praxis; ultimately, the movement began to divide. In this period, the Methodist trajectory seems to be towards becoming a church in its own right, yet under Wesley's leadership, it holds its place within the Church of England. The ecclesiological self-understanding of the Methodist movement lies within this confusion.

In the years after Wesley's death, the Methodist movement continued to grow and develop, soon becoming a separate church in its own right. This development resulted in several divisions which led to independent Methodist church groupings, each with particular emphases and structures. These groups included the *Wesleyan Methodist Connexion* (Kent, 1978; Rack, 1983; J. M. Turner, 1985), the *Methodist New Connexion* (R. E. Davies, 1963; Wilkinson, 1978), the *Primitive Methodist Connexion* (Kendall, 1919; Lysons, 2001), the *Bible Christian Movement* (Bourne, 1905; Pyke, 1941) and later the *United Methodist Free Churches* (Beckerlegge, 1957). These groups gradually united until in 1932 *The Methodist Church of Great Britain* was formed.

The Methodist Church was formed from these various traditions and positions, it does not have a unified history in practice or theology, rather it remains a combination of differing emphases and ideas. It seems to me, then, that Methodist identity is a contextual construct, and any attempt to articulate such identity or

identities must begin by exploring the local context of a Methodist church. I suggest that this is the experience that best reveals a lived Methodist tradition.

2.2 The Reflexive Turn

I have argued that experience provides important insight when considering the Methodist tradition; in this section I outline how experience is understood and used within practical theology, and how it relates to my study of Methodist communities.

Practical theology rests on the assertion that Christian theology is most revealing when its academic insights are in conversation with praxis and the experience of life. The rise of practical theology has seen a number of scholars argue for a more reflexive approach to theology and ecclesiology.[5] This approach, Elaine Graham argues, emerges from the doubt of "epistemologies that lay claim to neutrality and objectivity, insisting on critical attention to the material and ideological circumstances within which claims to truth are constructed" (2017, p. 5). In response to this, practical theologians recognise that an individual's experience is not objective, but carries their cultural, social, and ideological subjectivity. Therefore, as Graham notes, this requires "attention to the contextual and autobiographical nature of practical theological knowledge" (2017, p. 6). Practical theology values experience as a fundamental resource for theological reflection, it "involves an [intentional] encounter with people in the reality of life's experiences" (Lartey, 2000, p. 132). The purpose of this encounter is not exploration which "leads nowhere" (Ballard and Prichard, 1996, p. 164), but reflection that leads to "transformative practice" (E. Graham, 2000a, p. 113) finding "new ways of being" (Leach, 2007, p. 30).

Experience provides knowledge and insight, enabling people to make sense of their world and orientate themselves to context in which they exist, this is revealed in the practices of their everyday life. Nancy Ammerman notes that these practices shape behaviour and create ways in which humans express agency within their sociological context (2007, pp. 233 -234). The 'local' experience then, is the locus of self for individuals and communities, and the site where narratives of place are written and

[5] For further exploration of and support for this position see Astley, 2002; Ballard & Prichard, 1996; Browning, 1991; Graham, 1996; Green, 2009; Leach, 2007; McGuire, 2008; Osmer, 2008; Pattison & Woodward, 2000; Schreiter, 1985.

enacted. Reflecting on this, some researchers move to write themselves into their research or draw on their own experiences. Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh comments that a

> common and powerful motive for turning to the examinations of the self is to draw on direct experiences in the field in order to access knowledge of the subject's world that might otherwise be unavailable or extremely difficult to access (2013, p. 5).

To argue for 'direct experience' as Venkatesh does is complicated, as the stories that communicate an individual's 'truths' are constructed and contextual. I suggest that there is no such thing as direct experience, rather there is 'narrative experience' which is always subjective as it is written through a person's life and their subjective, conscious and unconscious, reflection. However, if this narrative experience is valued and received, then the voice of individual experience can provide a source of information which can be vital in accessing the forming influences of a particular community and hearing its voice. In my research, I describe the nature of local Methodism using local narratives as a source of information, a contextually-located voice which has been overlooked or underused in the study of Methodism. These voices reveal the nature of lived Methodism, the experience of those who identify themselves as Methodist and express that in the life of a church community.

In 1985, Robert Schreiter argued for the importance of local theology. He asks,

> how is a community to go about bringing to expression its own experience of Christ in a concrete situation? And how is this to be related to a tradition that is often expressed in language and concepts vastly different from the present situation? (1985, p. xi).

Schreiter argues that local theology is created through the dialectical engagement of various sources of information such as texts, histories, traditions, and experience. This engagement demonstrates the way in which local communities do not simply appropriate a given theology (or ecclesiology); rather, it is critically appropriated in context, and this appropriation itself is dependent on the context of the community.

The way a church community reflects on its life and writes its narrative is a deeply theological process. It is an explicitly theological task as communities intentionally consider the way their practice is, or should be, shaped by their faith, and an implicit process as those same communities are affected by their faith and life of their community. Within this process, context is vital and should not be ignored as it feeds the theological task. Stephen Pattison and James Woodward (1994) understand Practical Theology as a conversation between self, church, and world. There may be different types of conversations taking place, perhaps simultaneously, which all have the potential to hold transformational knowledge. Emmanuel Lartey's (2000, pp. 128 - 134) theological cycle offers an insight in locating this knowledge, he suggests a cyclical process with five distinct phases: the process begins with concrete *'experience'*; he highlights the importance of theology beginning with stories of real people and contexts. Next, he moves to *situational analysis*, this phase draws on a range of disciplines; while not assuming a complete understanding of their complexity, differing perspectives are offered to aid interpretation of the experience. Thirdly within *theological analysis,* issues of faith are considered and brought into conversation with the Christian tradition. The fourth phase is labelled *situational analysis of theology,* here the faith perspectives are questioned and challenged in relation to the experience under discussion. Finally, a 'response' is demanded to the reflective process. It is in the final phase that Lartey makes an important condition: "here the person-in-community recognises and acts responsibly in the light of the vision and re-visioning encountered" (p. 135). A practitioner does not decide any preferable option alone, rather the experience of community informs such decisions. In this work, I consider the way three communities create narratives, locating the life of their church in their context and within the Methodist tradition. These narratives are constructed as the community enacts a particular way of being, incorporating the

external influences of the society in which they live and the denominational ownership of the church.

In *Pastoral Theology as Attention* (2007, pp. 24-30), Jane Leach demonstrates a similar need to attend to context outlining the five distinct steps of her theological process. She defines attention as engaging "the embodied senses that belong to the interpretation of living human documents as well as intellectual faculties" (2007, p. 23) to listen. Leach suggests a practitioner attends to the voices present in any situation, to the wider issues, their own voice, feelings and instincts, and also to how they locate themselves within the emerging issues. The practitioner then gives attention to the theological tradition and the wider mission of the church. This model not only allows but insists that a practitioner is attentive to the context or incident they are reflecting on. Leach recognises that an individual must listen to their own voice, which is located in their context, and assess how it interacts with the other voices speaking from within and speaking into that context to govern practice. Lartey and Leach suggest ways for individuals to reflect effectively, but this process is also corporate. As individuals attend to context within the life of a community, they encounter other voices, whose interaction drives the reflection of the community, to seek new and renewed practice, and ultimately revealing the 'voice' of the community. Practical theology highlights modes of theological reflection which enable individuals to engage, but they can also illuminate the communal process. In any context there are a number of voices speaking in to and out of that situation; it is only by hearing those voices and exploring their interaction that the context can be properly understood. Edward Farley (2000) argues that a crucial stage in the theological process should be to "correct the abstraction committed by the focus on a single situation" (p. 121), on occasion, however, the abstraction may be from too strong a focus on the individual rather than the communal reflective process.

An attempt to form an understanding of an individual church community cannot ignore the broader context of the secular and church worlds beyond its boundaries. That broader context is in constant dialogue with the local context and this interaction illuminates the identity of a church. Richard Osmer (2008) argues that

part of any reflective process is the search for a 'normative' perspective. The normative perspective a community may adopt is always a contextual construct; its normativity is created in the interaction of the influences in the community and its collective life. Reflecting on this kind of interaction, Ruard Ganzevoort highlights the key question church communities are asking: "how we can live life more adequately in relation to the sources of religious tradition and to the ideas about the divine?" (2009, p. 4). The community lives in relation to the sources it interacts with but enacts its own understanding locally.

The importance of context in relation to the mission of the church is highlighted by Kevin Vanhoozer, who argues that the purpose of the church is to "cultivate the life of Christ in ourselves, our neighbours and our neighbourhoods" (2007, p. 58). This is only possible when a community is fully engaged in its context. However, the "package of beliefs and practices" (McGuire, 2008, p. 11) people subscribe to are dependent on their experience and the context in which they express their religion. McGuire argues that all religions are necessarily syncretic, they continually change as they are lived in context (2008, pp. 88-93). This understanding of religion is not without criticism: within the Christian tradition, George Chryssides (2009) argues that there are normative patterns to which Christians, and therefore churches, naturally adhere within the tradition to which they belong. He maintains that while there are a number of different groups who claim the title of Christian, they are united by the same story, which provides a normative framework for Christian faith and spirituality as it is "acted out" (p. 275) in the yearly liturgical cycle of the church. Stanley Hauerwas (1981, p. 92) argues that the church should strive to be a society shaped by the character of God as revealed in the scriptural narratives. He suggests that such a community is formed by the story set out in those narratives:

> what we require is not no story, but a true story. Such a story is one that provides a pilgrimage with appropriate exercises and disciplines of self-examination. Christians believe scripture offers such a story (p. 149).

For Hauerwas, it is the story of scripture that forms the community of the church, and the community of the church becomes the continuation of that story in the world. The Biblical narrative Hauerwas appeals to, however, cannot be considered an objective 'standard' or be considered universal as is it is enacted in the liturgical calendar of a particular church. As he reflects on the mission of the church, Vanhoozer characterises that mission as "participating in God's building project" (2007, p. 55). It is not enough to believe or accept the doctrines and received narrative, the church is seen in what it does which at its heart is participation in the local life. McGuire (2008, p. 13) notes that an individual [or community] does not simply believe in, or think about, their religious world, they experience it. That experience changes the nature of their participation and therefore their lived experience. The liturgical calendar may indeed be the same in two or more churches but the local experience of it is not.

While I accept that communities adopt certain formational narratives, for instance, their scriptures or, denominational emphases; no two communities share the same precise experience of religion, because the particular emphasis and understanding of that community is lived in the life of their context. When these formational narratives are lived out, they are negotiated within the contextual experience of the community, as Robert Orsi explains, "religious practices and understandings only have meaning in relation to other cultural forms and in relation to the life experiences and actual circumstance of the people using them" (2002, pp. xxxvii - xxxviii). The context in which religion is enacted has a continuing effect on how that religion is perceived, Nancy Ammerman (2007) uses the term "everyday religion" to convey a concern for how religion operates in the lives of communities and individuals. She comments that "everyday religion takes place in the fascinating flow of choosing and creating that constitutes modern life" (p. 234), the particular choices in one context are unique to that context, and therefore, the way religion 'takes place' is equally unique. Religion cannot be understood objectively, as something one accepts and enacts. As any person lives their life, they influence, and are influenced by, their context, being what Orsi describes as "both subjects and objects" (2002, p. xlii) both shaping and being shaped though experience. Acknowledging religion as lived

experience allows connections to be made between the context in which religion operates and the distinct shape it takes.

In her ethnographic study with Anglican and Methodist women, Ellen Clark-King (2004) demonstrates the value of hearing the voices and stories of local church communities. Through conversations with individual Christian women, exploring the expression of faith in working class churches in the North East of England, Clark-King provides a way of understanding the experience of God in community. These experiences, while different from each other, provide a more holistic understanding of the church. Clark-King argues that the church cannot be understood without attention to the experience of community, which, when interrogated, reveals a theology of the whole person. This theology is not simply an academic or confessional construct but is a "theology of the heart" (p. 3) which engages the whole community rather than a theological or ecclesial elite. Clark-King (pp. 185-210) suggests a vision of "choral theology" where the many voices within the church 'sing' together, their voices may not be entirely harmonious and still carry their inherent differences but all have a place in the music and formation of the 'song' of the church. The Church is shaped by the voices of all those who experience its life, the different emphases and charisms of each context forming a more united, yet not uniform, whole. To understand the narrative of a local church, I suggest that the life of the church must be interrogated, allowing the different voices of that context to be heard as they form a community narrative. In her study of Good Samaritan Church in the United States, Mary McClintock Fulkerson (2007) argues that the recognition of context is crucial in forming theology of everyday religion. Using a participant observation mode of ethnographic research, McClintock Fulkerson explores how the practices of a church community reveal its underlying theology. This could not be satisfactorily exposed in reading doctrinal statements or policy documents, rather it is the living community with all its strengths and weaknesses that reveal the true nature of the church. She notes that the practices of a church are not always intelligible in isolation. Instead, those practices find their place and sense in relation to a "larger whole" (2007, p. 39) where they relate and interrelate to the stories and practices embedded in community. In my research the practices of the church are

related as part of the shared life of the participants, they communicate something about the nature of the church in that place and are written into the narrative they construct.

The congregational study that James Hopewell developed in the 1980s similarly recognises the importance of lived experience and narrative identity in the life of a church community. Hopewell locates this lived quality in the stories that a congregation tells about itself. He comments,

> a vital congregation is one whose self-understanding is not reduced to data and programs but which instead is nurtured by its persistent attention to the story by which it identifies itself (1987, p. 193).

Hopewell argues that the congregational stories have a power in community, reminding a community that 'they are': confirming their own sense of being and belonging. The congregation's story also has a power of characterisation, demonstrating to a community that it has a place in the world with a shared identity. Finally, the congregational story has a confessional power, allowing for reflection on the past and a vision of the future. When a congregation attends to its story, Hopewell claims, it is enabled to understand itself in a new way. His model allows a congregation to "first watch ourselves, how we set and characterise our story, how our own plot moves through history" (p. 199). This attention allows a congregation to understand itself in a deeper way. I contend, then, that the value of these congregational stories is not simply held in the story alone, the greatest value is in the experience of these stories in community. As these stories are formed, external influences are appropriated and adapted to form a congregation's lived story. The literal writing of this story is of much less importance to a community than the lived experience of being a character or group within it. This story of identity cannot be told without significant attention to the lived reality of their shared, enacted story, which is embedded in community.

In this work I consider the experience of Methodist church communities in an official Methodist context. I suggest that any official account of 'Methodism' needs to be held in a dialectical relationship with the lived experience of the local community. While this may not strictly define and align the practices of each community with other Methodist churches, the influence of 'Methodism' in these communities suggests that there may be a 'Methodist way' of living religion in context. I have avoided using terms such as 'ordinary Methodism' reflecting Jeff Astley's *Ordinary Theology* (2002). While I find using 'ordinary' as a way of characterising church experience appealing as Astley suggests that ordinary theology provides a way of understanding of doctrinal and practical norms within the life of a community. However, Astley reflects on how beliefs are enacted by Christians rather than how experience forms a way of believing or enables an understanding of narrative identity through an appeal to lived religion. The lived experience of a community, including its theological and ecclesiological awareness, is written into the stories those communities tell about themselves. These become the place where identity is held and transmitted; but without the lived experience they have no power as agents of revelation or transformation in community. In his study of the effect of Methodism in a Durham mining community, Robert Moore (1974) argues that is it not only the beliefs a community holds and articulates that define the effect of faith in a community, rather it is the entire social engagement within that community, the internal relationships within a church group and its perception of itself, which must be taken into account by hearing the stories told within that church. The local voices of a church community are fed through engagement with the social life of that community and the broader societal context. Attending to the place in which that church exists enables a fuller appreciation of the local church.

Experience and context is paramount in the theological process, it locates theological reflection within a community and provides a place in which theological (and contextual) norms can be enacted. As churches reflect on their communal life, they engage in a profoundly theological task and as such, context must be taken seriously. Taking the context of church and its congregation seriously requires attention be given to the lived experience. The methods of Practical Theology, which enable

focussed attention and theological reflection through enabling a "person-in-community" (Lartey, 2000, p. 135) to listen to the "voices" (Leach, 2007) of that context, can be deployed to explore the shared experience and reflection of a community lived experience.

The experience of the local context reveals the place where official theology and ecclesiology interacts with the concrete situation of a church community, producing a lived experience of church. To understand the nature of Methodist churches, it is important to hear their stories and their narratives to understand the nature of that lived experience; this is where a lived Methodism is encountered.

2.3 Methodists and Methodism

When Methodism is examined and explored, the focus has often been on how the movement developed and how its shared emphasis has been articulated in the life of the church. Methodism does not have a unified theological or ecclesiological position; its history demonstrates this divergence of views through the number of Methodist traditions which united into the Methodist Church in 1932. Despite this, scholars have attempted to define Methodism by looking for overarching narratives that exist in Methodist literature or in published Methodist theology.[6] These perspectives understand Methodism as something which exists as an institution that communicates the emphases and character to a local Methodist community or church. In this understanding, Methodism is perceived as a unifying spirituality which exists in a local church context, where unity is provided through a Methodist ecclesial identity. In this section I consider the ways in which Methodists have defined and reflected on Methodism, the kind of Methodism presented here is considered universal, is understood centrally and enacted locally.

In his tract *The Character of a Methodist*, John Wesley highlights the "fruits of a living faith" (2007a, p. 346), which he considers the core of Methodism. Wesley's concern was to explain what Methodists do, as he was in a context where Methodists were often met with suspicion and concern. David Hempton (2005, p. 87) calls this a

[6] For instance, see: Carter, 2002; Davies, 1963; Dunning, 1987; Fitzgerald, 1903; Richey, 2005; Tabraham, 1995.

"culture of hostility"[7] as questions about the legal status of the Methodist movement and its purpose were posed. Wesley, therefore, defines a Methodist as someone who loves God, rejoices in God, gives thanks, prays constantly, and loves others (2007a). Richard Hietzenrater (1995, p. 129) notes that this tract was not simply an apology for Methodism but also an acknowledgement that Methodists were neither seeking division nor the formation of a separate denomination. Wesley is, therefore, highlighting the spiritual character of Methodism rather than speaking of the internal structures of the organisation as he continues to understand Methodism as a group within the Anglican Church. Wesley was convinced that Methodism should not become a separate church and as such the characteristics he presents allow him to argue for a Methodism that exists within the established church. At this point, there was no need to define Methodism in explicitly ecclesial terms.

According to Steve Harper (2015), the characteristics identified by Wesley still define a Methodist, but he is unable to offer any clear working definition of Methodism, either as a movement or a church in this light. He comments, "the Wesleyan way of discipleship is a way for us all. It can be rooted in any particular soil" (2015, p. 62). Harper's aim is to reassert the characteristics as distinctly Methodist, arguing that where these things are present, Methodism is present. He argues that the characteristics identified by Wesley form part of an "intentional life" (2015, p. viii) which nourishes and expresses the original intention of the Methodist movement. This position, however, raises questions in understanding a Methodist 'church' as opposed to a Methodist 'movement', that is, how the search for an intentional life, revealed in spiritual practices, is translated into an understanding of church.

In 1903, William Fitzgerald described the theology of the early Methodists stating:

> they boldly and definitely taught that – all men can be saved; that all men may be saved; that all men may know themselves saved; and that all men may be saved to the uttermost [sic] (p. 173).

[7] A full picture of the opposition to Methodism in the eighteenth century is provided by John Walsh, 1972.

These marks have been called the "four alls of Methodism", they are broadly accepted as 'Methodist'[8] and have subsequently been adopted as demonstrating a distinctive mark of Methodism. Whilst I accept that these charisms exist within Methodism, there are questions to be asked concerning how they are revealed and located in the life of a church. A further question is whether they are part of the lived experience of Methodism at a local level, or whether they remain part of the espoused theology of the Methodist movement.[9] Forty four years after Fitzgerald, William Anderson (1947) draws together contributions from several writers identifying the key Methodist emphases as: Salvation for all; a belief that God can be experienced; freedom from rigid creeds; a search for perfection; an itinerant ministry; an engagement within education and social reform; and a belief in the "world parish". The areas Anderson considers are an attempt to outline the distinctive nature of Methodism itself, they express patterns found in Methodist history, and in incidents within that history. They do not, however, present a unified Methodist experience, rather they highlight aspects of ecclesiology and spirituality which may be found within the Methodist tradition. Anderson does not explore the place at which they interact with the local experience of Methodism in his American context.

The tension between operant and espoused understandings of Methodism can be seen in the work of John Vincent (2015), who attempts to outline a way contemporary Methodism might understand itself. He argues that a dual focus on "Christ as centre" (pp. 31 - 39) and "practice as centre" (pp. 42 - 50) would allow

[8] A *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* refers to the "four alls" as a "convenient summary of the 'Methodist gospel' (Vickers, 2000, p. 127), and they are highlighted on the Methodist Church of Great Britain's website as a "traditional summary of Methodist teaching": http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/all-can-be-saved.

[9] As part of their discussion regarding "four voices of theology" (pp. 53 -56), Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins (2010) use the term "Espoused" to reflect the theology "embedded in within a groups articulation of its beliefs" (p. 54) and 'Operant' as the "theology embedded within the practice of a group"(p. 54). They also refer to 'Normative' and 'Formal' theology which represent official church teaching and resources, and academic theology respectively (pp. 53 - 56). I am using espoused and operant to characterise the difference between the resources and influence of official Methodism and the lived experience of Methodist communities in their context.

Methodism to express itself in mission. This expression would focus on Methodism as "school for discipleship" (pp. 31 - 39), intentional community" (pp. 64 - 76), "street corner project" (pp. 79 - 88) and "movement" (pp. 91 - 101). Vincent's contribution reflects his investment in urban ministry, and therefore he offers a picture of how Methodists might understand themselves within that context rather than a way of being for the whole church. The perspectives of Harper, Fitzgerald, and Vincent suggest that Methodist identity is primarily about practice and not doctrine, yet the practices they promote emerge from their context, rather than being universally Methodist as they claim.

The sense of Methodist identity existing in action, via the practices of the local congregation, is furthered by a group of practitioners and scholars from the British Methodist Church who were asked to reflect on key aspects of Methodist theology and practice. They considered Methodism as an evangelistic faith, a biblical faith, a sacramental faith, a diverse faith, a shared faith, an ecumenical faith and a world faith (Curran and Shier-jones, 2009). Rupert Davies (1976) attempts to outline the core characteristics of Methodists in his book *What Methodists Believe*. Although Davis understands Methodism to be led by practice, he defines Methodism in terms of belief rather than action. Davies describes the particular Methodist contribution as the practice of free and liturgical worship styles; a concern for social justice; a belief in the universal nature of the Gospel message; the high place of the laity; and an insistence on the personal nature of Christianity (1976, pp. 72-79). This, Davies argues, is where Methodism has always existed, in a practical response to the world in which it is situated. However, I suggest that this practical response is best understood as a lived experience rather than a reflection of enacted beliefs.

These scholars present their understanding of the 'core' of Methodist identity in different ways, yet they agree that there are a series of Methodist 'charisms' which need to be recaptured by the church. This recapturing or re-scripting is understood as enabling communities to embrace their Methodist identity and understand Methodism as practice or movement rather than church.

A similar theme is expressed in Martyn Atkins' reflections on Methodism as a discipleship movement (2011), he encourages the church to recapture its founding

spirit through prioritising actions which use buildings and finance for the mission of the church. He argues that this

> Involves the whole Connexion and the Team as a part of it, is an attempt to identify a first grouping of decisive intentions that give clear expression to our desired outcome to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission (2011, p. 28).

Atkins is attempting to form a new (or renewed) ecclesial identity for the Methodist church. Speaking of Methodism as 'movement' may allow the church to reconnect with the active nature of a traditional Methodist discipleship. An understanding of Methodism as 'movement' does reflect the ecclesiology of 'act' seen in John Wesley and early Methodism, but this attempt to form a new ecclesial identity still begins from a 'central' position. Roger Walton (2015) argues that in discerning such identity, the heritage of Methodism must be valued, "the teleological and monastic dimensions of early Methodism need to be recovered within this movement" (p. 74). Walton recognises both challenges and opportunities in moving away from speaking of ecclesiology in the "established language" (p. 74), to speaking of Methodism as 'movement', and thus acknowledging the active nature of Methodist experience. When Martyn Atkins articulated his ecclesiology of Methodism as 'movement', he was the General Secretary of the Methodist Church. This demonstrates how Atkins' argument was emerging from the Methodist institution rather than from the local contexts.

There is an impression from early Methodist history which is reflected in the current climate, that Methodists have understood themselves as a 'movement', authorising a particular group of people with the task of directing its national life. The independent life of Methodist societies and later churches is held in relation to the Methodism that the whole movement shares. Methodist identity is never held entirely locally, it is a concept held across the whole church and expressed in a local context by those who accept their place in the Methodist Church. However, this local

expression is not uniform as it is related to its context, highlighting the need for attention to the experience of lived Methodism.

In the work of the scholars represented here, a Methodism which is transmitted from one generation to another and articulated locally is presented. However, this is a 'Methodism' that is understood and directed from the 'centre' and given assent locally; it is not a reflection of the lived experience of 'ordinary' Methodist people.

2.3(i) Connexionalism

Connexionalism is crucial to understanding Methodist identity within the British Methodist church. In the eighteenth century, 'connexion' was used to refer to "the circle of those connected to some person or group" (Vickers, 2000, p. 77). Originally it meant those who were connected with John Wesley's work, the Connexion expresses the "mutuality and interdependence" (TMCP, 1999, p. 51) of Methodist people and societies within the Methodist Church. The Connexional principle is intended to remind local churches that they have a place in the whole church, and to safeguard the voice of the local church in the governance practices of the whole church.

A number of scholars, including Atkins, (2007, 2011) Walton (2015) and Richey (2005, 2009a, 2009b) reflect on the nature of Connexionalism and it has a prominent place in the statements of the Methodist Church itself. The British Methodist Church still places tremendous value on this element of its ecclesiology. It displays the conviction that the church is one united body and claims this is essential to any future model or models of Methodism. Carter (2002, p. 18) comments "Connexionalism is not simply a Methodist 'peculiar institution'… but is a valid ecclesiological principle in itself, directly relevant to that church's institutional expression of its interdependent nature".

The report *Called to Love and Praise* (p. 53) states "Methodism continues to adhere to the Connexional principle as a vital structural expression of the interdependence of all its churches". The Connexion holds the Methodist church together, allowing the church to exist as a "rich tapestry" (Richey, 2009a, p. 227) of tradition and practice. *Called to Love and Praise* argues Connexionalism provides three shared

emphases, holding a diverse group of churches together: The first emphasis is the structure of churches, Circuits and Districts which demonstrate the 'connectedness' of each individual church and Methodist. Secondly, through a commitment to, and valuing of, small groups which encourage shared fellowship and discipleship. Thirdly, a belief that the church should be structured for mission (1999), allowing resources, including people and finance, to be used in the most appropriate place within the connexion. It is clear, therefore, that this understanding of Methodism holds the possibility of divergent practices in local Methodist churches but is still not clear how those practices are authentically Methodist.

In this section, I have noted the ways that Methodism has been understood in terms of its action. That action is governed by historical emphases and traditional practices that have come to characterise a Methodist 'way' of being Christian and 'church'. Here Methodism is understood as a movement, which indicates its forming influences, but these cannot be held by the local church alone. The history of Methodism as a movement which later developed into a church creates challenges, as elements of 'movement' are still valued, and resist being defined in expressly ecclesiological terms. This focus on movement naturally requires local expressions to be considered in forming a coherent picture of the church; thus, Methodism is only properly known through the life of the whole church exercised through the Connexion.

2.4 Listening for a Lived Methodism

The Methodist Church requires its understanding and practice of Connexion to function effectively as a national church, provide a sense of continuity and offer a corporate, official Methodist identity. Methodism can be understood as a movement, both in historical terms and through its present ecclesial structures; however, to move towards a fuller understanding of Methodist identity, I suggest that the experience and narrative of lived Methodism is instructive. This Methodism is lived within an understanding and acceptance of official Methodism, yet it is a contextual, lived reality. Narratives of identity are written and enacted in the local Methodist context of churches and congregations. In listening to these narratives, the way Methodism exists in these churches, and is lived in community, is revealed.

There does appear to be some ground for defining Methodism and the Methodist Church as 'act' in the same way that John Wesley did, to maintain that the core of the church's self-understanding is held in practice. Yet scholars[10] tend to locate this action in the Connexion, or in the history of Methodist activity, rather than in local expressions of that Connexionalism. This understanding is seen in The Methodist Church's *Our Calling,* which emerged from *Called to Love and Praise*, stating that the Methodist Church is called to worship, learning and caring, service, and evangelism (TMCP, 2014). *Our Calling* implicitly understands 'church' as action, yet local complexity of that action is left ambiguous without any sense of what might be considered normative. The marks and language of Methodism that Richey (2005, 2009b), Anderson (1947), Curran and Shier-Jones (2009), and others identify do not constitute a wholly satisfactory model of self-understanding, as they do not engage in significant self-critical reflection at a local level. They assume an official Methodism will translate to a local reality without attention to the local context; yet it is the local context where that official Methodism becomes part of people's lived experience. Lived religion requires what McGuire (2008, p. 15) calls "practical coherence": it has to make sense in the context of the practice, it is not possible to simply 'translate' principles into a set of actions.

The coherence of Methodist communities must be practical; it must make sense in the daily life of members of those communities. McGuire is careful to state that it should not be assumed that there will be a "cognitive consistency between individuals' religion, as institutionally framed, and a person's actual religion, as lived" (2008, p. 15). In this work, I am interested in how context provides a place for consistency in an individual's lived religion to be located, and how that experience relates to intuitional Methodism. If Methodism is to be fully understood, it is not enough to attend to the official religion alone, the lived experience must be considered as a phenomenon in its own right.

In 1932 three Methodist traditions merged, bringing together a range of Methodist and Wesleyan traditions. The Methodist Church holds this diversity by accepting that

[10] Anderson, 1947; Atkins, 2011; Davies, 1976; Fitzgerald, 1903; Richey, 2005, 2009b.

it consists of a number of 'Methodist' traditions and that context allows for great differences in expression and understanding, while retaining the title '*Methodist*'. This understanding is found at the heart of the Methodist Church and written into the doctrinal clause of the Methodist *Deed of Union* (1932). This document was written as the various Methodist traditions united and states:

> the Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church ... it rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation (TMCP, 2017b).

The *Deed of Union* does not attempt to define the nature of the 'fundamental principles' which it claims. This intentional ambiguity is wide enough to allow for a broad range of individual expression, allowing an openness and acceptance of expression within the united tradition. The *Deed of Union* implicitly acknowledges that in bringing the traditions together, Methodist identity could not be held by the institution alone, rather it would be held in the local church communities themselves.

I contend that Methodist ecclesiology is enacted at a local level by communities who acknowledge their place within the Methodist Church via the structures and procedures of Connexionalism. It is, therefore, within those local Methodist communities that a lived Methodism is revealed. Within this understanding, I argue that an attempt to grasp what it means to be Methodist begins by hearing the identity-bearing narratives of local communities, rather than attempting to understand Methodist identity by simply reading the history of the Methodist movement or directing a new official identity from the centre of the organisation.

The phrase 'a work in progress' was used in relation to Methodist theology and practice by Angela Shier-Jones (2005). She argues that doing theology is an endless task for any church, and as such, the best a church can hope for is that its theology remains a work in progress. In an attempt to explore contemporary Methodism and

the Methodism John Wesley experienced, Shier-Jones points out that there is very little resemblance between the two; she argues that Methodism's debt to Wesley is factual and mythological. The foundational documents of the Methodist Church, formed in 1932, include material written or compiled by Wesley. This creates a factual link, but these documents are infrequently referred to and do not form part of a local Methodist consciousness, thus the connection may be seen as mythological, and Wesley's influence perceived to be stronger than it actually is. In attempting to outline a Methodist perspective on the nature of the church, David Carter also acknowledges that "the task of Methodism in both mission and unity remains unfinished" (2002, p. 155). If Methodism may be understood as an 'unfinished', developing tradition, then perhaps the solution is to see this dynamic as something embodied in practice. If this is the case, then attention to the narratives of local lived Methodism is needed in order to see how the community is the place in which tradition abides and unfolds, rather than in the policies and statements of official Methodism alone.

Shier-Jones, Davies and Rupp (1965) argue that the development of Methodist theology and practice is not due to a comprehensive doctrinal position, but rather an ongoing development which might ultimately be understood as pragmatic. Shier-Jones suggests that any recognisable or distinctive Methodist theology is held "in what makes Methodists, 'Methodist'" (2005, p. 3). However, defining this elusive 'Methodism' is somewhat more complicated, and Shier-Jones argues that this exists in the work of the people, specifically in the work of those who develop Methodist theology, "it is *their* work, that is, their questions, their concerns, their actions and their debates that shape and define contemporary Methodist theology" (2005, p. 4). I understand the 'work' of Methodist people to include their practice in community, this work reveals the nature of lived Methodism.

My argument through this thesis continues Shier-Jones' insights. I accept the notion that Methodism may be understood as a 'work in progress', a process driven by Methodist people, but I will also demonstrate from my research that hearing the narrative of lived Methodism enables a more holistic understanding of Methodism itself. These narratives are the work of Methodist people who enact their faith, and

their Methodism in a particular context. It is too simplistic to suggest that Methodist tradition is developed by the work of the people, without exploring the nature of this local work in Methodist communities. Listening to the experience of lived Methodism allows this local voice to be heard.

Lived religion examines the mundane, everyday, embodied quotidian practices, actions, and activity of religious people and communities, considering the impact of their faith. I have suggested this as a way of considering the three Methodist church communities in this research. However, I do not explore the practices themselves in detail, because they inform the identity narratives that communities construct and create a way of communicating identity in a narrative form which values the everyday experience of lived religion. Through their everyday experience, participants in this work create a way of being in their church, I call this lived Methodism, which they communicate through the narrative of place.

CHAPTER THREE

LISTENING TO STORIES, HEARING THE NARRATIVES

This project examines the narratives of three self-identifying Methodist church communities to reveal the shared experience of lived Methodism. To fulfil this aim, I have developed a methodology which acknowledges that identity is expressed in narrative forms which are multi-dimensional and contextually constructed. This methodology uses a series of qualitative semi-structured group interviews in each church to allow stories to be told and narratives to emerge, revealing an understanding of lived Methodism.

In this chapter, I outline the decisions I made as this research was shaped and implemented to make the process I used transparent. Firstly, I will show the understanding of narrative research that I adopted, followed by my rationale for the location of my study and the churches I chose to work with. I will then discuss the methods I used to gather and analyse data, and how I overcame the ethical issues inherent in this research.

3.1 Narrative Research

My argument in this thesis is that an appeal to narrative reveals how Methodist identity is constructed in the churches I studied, therefore I used a narrative research methodology. In Chapter One, I reflected on the importance of narrative as the location of identity and through which it is articulated. Lawler argues that identity is "produced through the narrative people use to explain and understand their lives" (2008, p. 17); narrative reveals how a person's or community's history is conceptualised and communicated. Using narrative analysis allows a record of a person's lived experience to be captured and, in my research, recorded as a textual account which can then be interrogated and analysed (Riessman, 1993). The narratives of an individual or community are always interpreted by those who tell them, but they also require additional interpretation. Riesman refers to these as "ambiguous representations ... talk, text, interaction, and interpretation. It is not possible to be neutral and objective" (1993, p. 8). Therefore, a researcher does not

have direct access to the narratives that people tell; rather they can access interpreted narratives told in particular contexts and use analytical tools to interrogate them.

In this work, I understand narrative research to be "any study that uses or analyses narrative materials ... to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998). It generates accounts of people's lives and is concerned with the way in which a narrative is produced through the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Earthy and Cronin, 2008). To approach narrative research with a concern for the social context and meaning-making potential of narratives requires attention to the elements which affect their production. Christine Bold (2012, pp. 18-24) highlights these; she discusses the effect of temporality, recognising that events (and stories) have a past, present, and future which continually affects their interpretation and reinterpretation. Bold also notes that individuals are always "at a point of personal change" (2012, p. 19) that influences their perception of events in different stages of their lives, the actions and choices of that individual are also influential in their assessment of experience. Bold is also careful to point out that there is "no certainty in narrative research" (2012, p. 20), rather it aims to offer an interpretation of experience within the context in which it is found. Despite the challenges of provisionality and temporality, narrative research 'captures' the story of an individual or community at a particular moment in a concrete form, enabling reflection and the seeking of new or transformed practices in the individual or community's life.

In this research, I used narrative research with participants from church congregations. These methods allowed me to reveal meaning-making strategies by engaging with individual and corporate experience, and to translate the 'action' or lived experience of the churches into a shared narrative understanding. While these do not provide any objective certainty, they express something of the inner life of the church communities which is deeply rooted in their context. It is essential to appreciate context in "making sense" (Bold, 2012, p. 21) of the experiences described.

The three churches I have worked with construct their identity through the interpretation and re-interpretation of their experience. Using narrative analysis allowed me access to the communities' shared identity and enabled me to consider the implications to conceptualise Methodist identity as lived experience.

3.2 Defining Context

In September 2008 I became the minister of four Methodist churches in West Yorkshire. Despite being different from one another, each church claimed a Methodist identity and had the same minister. I decided to focus my research on these churches rather than selecting other Methodist churches because they shared broadly the same geographical context, and, in the research, I could reflect on my practice as Methodist minster in different expressions of Methodism. This approach created issues for me to address in the complexities of adopting an insider-outsider perspective,[11] but it allowed me to begin with challenges and questions emerging from my practice. In this I was able to the explore the relation between "theory, ideas, and doctrine … and the practical action which expresses that belief" (Ballard and Prichard, 1996, p. 45) in my own work. I chose to research three of the churches I was minister to; this was because they represented the greatest differences in practice. Two of the churches were very small with less than ten members. Therefore, I decided to use one of these churches, Eltham Avenue Methodist Church, [12] in my research. I chose this church rather than Twyford Methodist Church because several members of Sonning Methodist Church, which I was also researching, regularly attended events and acts of worship there. The three churches I researched were: Sonning Methodist Church, Ripley Methodist Church, and Eltham Avenue Methodist Church.

Sonning Methodist Church began in 1873 as a United Methodist Free Church. The church building was a large 'traditional' Methodist arrangement with box pews, two aisles, and a large central pulpit, it was built on the main road through the village, with a Sunday School hall added in 1908. In 2007, they decided to sell the original

[11] This will be addressed in detail later
[12] I have anonymised the names of all churches in this research.

church building and renovate the Sunday school hall, making this move in September 2008. In 1873 the village was dominated by three mills and a coal mine, most residents were employed in these industries. By 2008, the mills and mine had closed and their sites were replaced with new housing for those who work in local cities. Many of those living in the village's older housing had lived there for over twenty years. The church has a regular congregation of between thirty and forty people and a membership of sixty; the majority of these people are retired with a small group who are still of working age, and several children who are part of the Sunday School. There are weekly activities in the church which engage a significant proportion of the congregation: Ladies fellowship, Men's fellowship, a choir, a coffee morning, a mid-week Holy Communion, a Bible study and a Brownie pack. The church's services are varied using traditional hymns and more interactive styles involving the Sunday School children. The church is financially stable and has gained several new members in recent years who have moved from other local Anglican and United Reformed Churches.

The life of Ripley Methodist church began in 1886 as a Wesleyan Methodist church in what had been a small rural village, later becoming connected to the adjacent town when housing was built after the Second World War. The church had been used as a school, and a base for Scout groups in addition to having several of its own activities each week. By the mid-2000s however, the congregation had diminished, and it was possible that the church could close. At this point, the church members agreed a project to transform their building. They decided it would be remodelled into a children's soft play centre with a café and operating as a Christian business from Monday to Friday. There would be a new, intentionally lively and interactive, act of all-age worship aimed at families to take place once a month, on a Sunday afternoon. The reordered church building was named the 'Ripley Playhouse' and opened in 2007. It now averages two hundred customers a week, with between forty and sixty people attending the monthly act of worship.

Eltham Avenue Methodist church was founded in 1889 as a United Methodist Free Church in a small rural village, it was built as a large, galleried church with a high central pulpit, a Sunday School hall and a caretaker's cottage. The village had a

primary school, an Anglican church and a local shop centred around a village square. In the 1980s, the number attending the church declined, and the pressures of maintaining a large complex of buildings became too much of a burden, so the church decided to retain the front part of the old church and sell the remainder to be converted into housing. This work was completed, and the church continued. In addition to the Sunday services, the church held regular coffee mornings and hosted a Brownie pack. Eltham Avenue had a membership of sixteen with a regular congregation of twelve, all of whom were retired; six members of the congregation had joined the church between 2008 and 2010. The church favoured a traditional service with hymns and a spoken sermon. Eltham Avenue Methodist Church closed in 2012.

3.3 Methods

The churches I researched each had their own identity, and I held the view that these could be exposed through hearing the narratives of those communities. Therefore, to retrieve these narratives, I used a series of two semi-structured group interviews. The semi-structured method understands that the researcher is an active and reflexive partner in the research process (Mason, 2002, p. 66), and allows for perspectives expressed by participants to be probed, challenged, and developed as appropriate. This is because the interview does not require a strict set of questions to be asked, meaning additional questions driven by the responses of the participants can be asked. Using a semi-structured interview method does have some limitations, most notably there can be variation in the quality of data received (May, 2011, p. 135). This is because the interviewer responds to the dynamic relationship between interviewee[s] and interviewer, rather than using a fixed set of questions, therefore it is harder to "elicit information untainted by the context" (May, 2011, p. 135). In this research, I focus on community experience rather than a personal perspective on the nature of 'church' and what it means to be a Methodist church. Therefore, despite the potential limitations, a group interview method allows the members to talk and reflect together on the questions asked and form corporate narratives to express their group identity.

One of the strengths of a good group interview according to Zoltan Dörnyei (2007, p. 140), is that it flows naturally and is rich in the details it provides, however, there are limitations. Smithson (2000, p. 105) suggests that group interviews are not natural conversation rather they are social performances where participants produce experiences and opinions for the moderator. This can allow dominant voices to take over, or create an environment where only "certain types of socially acceptable opinion" (Smithson, 2000, p. 116) can emerge. Hamza Alshenqeeti (2014, p. 43) also notes that the performance of the groups can lead to inconsistencies and the potential for subconscious bias. I recognised these issues in my research design and incorporated a reliability test, which Creswell (2009, p. 191) describes as member checking. This involves sharing parts of the research with the participants to assess its accuracy and challenge inconsistency. I acknowledged the challenges of subjectivity and performance in group interviews, recognising that these issues exist in the production of identity narratives, and, as a result, would be reflected in the group narrative construction to a certain extent in any case. I decided to use a group interview method because, as Smithson (2000, p. 116) reflects, this requires a group to address questions and develop ideas together, it allows participants to create a narrative from their experience and in their language.

In designing the research, I initally considered using a visual method with the participants, similar to those outlined by Gauntlett (2007), Schratz and Steiner-Löffler (1998), and Whetton and McWhirter (1998).[13] I contemplated asking participants to create a visual timeline of their corporate church story, writing, drawing, and adding material as they saw fit; this would be followed by a discussion of the artefact created, focussing on questions such as 'tell me what is going on?', 'Why is this here?' or 'How do you make sense of this?'. Ultimately, I rejected this method as I was less

[13] I researched a number of visual research methods, including Gauntlett (2007) who asked a group of children to make a video of their environment, and discuss the results as a way of reflecting on their school. Schratz and Steiner-Löffler (1998) who designed a study where children took photos of their school, showing their likes and dislikes, and then discussed them, the process allowed a "rebuilding of human memory", which granted the researcher access to the inner world, making the invisible visible. Finally Whetton and McWhirter (1998) used drawings to explore children's understanding of health, providing a relevant starting point for discussion and material for instant feedback. I rejected these models in favour of a more dialogical approach to creating narratives through group interviews.

concerned with the history of the church than the current understanding of the participants, facilitating a dialogical approach in which stories were shaped by the group as a whole provided a more appropriate model to access forming narratives in community life.

The process I followed began with a pilot project[14] in a Methodist church in Cumbria to test out the kind of questions which enabled the group discussions, and how the member checking would work. Through this, I noted that the time between a group interview and member checking needed to be relatively short to allow participants to engage actively. After the pilot, I ensured there was no more than two weeks between the first group interview and the member checking exercise. After completing the group interview of the pilot project, I decided not to conduct individual interviews with members of the groups. I judged the strength of the group process to be the way participants negotiated their narrative and considered their Methodist identity, individual interviews would have reflected on that process, but would not have added to it. Therefore, I limited the scope of the study to the group interviews, recognising that the generation of a large amount of data is not necessarily beneficial if the aims of the project are clear (Richards, 2015, p. 25).

The process I followed consisted of two group interviews in each of the three churches to explore the stories of that place, enabling reflection on the participant's experience of their church and Methodism. Using a group interview allowed the narrative to be shaped and articulated by the interaction of the participants and the stories told. Tim May (2011, p. 139) notes that a group interview specifically allows for, and encourages, participants to talk to each other rather than simply to the researcher. To enable those in my research to negotiate a narrative of place together, it was important to use a method which facilitated this interaction. Within a group interview, however, it is important as Rosaline Barbour does, to start by creating a "safe space" (2007, p. 83) with introductions and a non-threatening opening question. Ann Cronin (2008, pp. 238 - 240) suggests a process to follow in group interviews, providing a structure which does not confuse either participants or

[14] Robson (2002) and Green (2008) both note the importance of a pilot, to test and refine the research process, and indicate possible avenues to explore.

the facilitator. I adapted this process in the group interviews I conducted, as it allowed a uniform structure in each group while allowing them to move at their speed and supplementary questions to be asked if necessary.

I began the first group interview with an introduction to the research and the purpose of the group, which I described simply as "an opportunity to talk together about the life of the church". I explained that the group would be recorded, using both video and audio technology, I would transcribe the recordings and be the only person with access to these materials. At this point, I also clarified that I would anonymise the names of both churches and participants, unless anyone objected, this was to allow the participants freedom to speak critically about The Methodist Church if they wished. It was particularly important to protect this critical voice, as there were Methodist Ministers and Local Preachers in the groups who may have been uncomfortable otherwise, thereby ensuring that no participant would be adversely affected by the research in this way (Fox, Martin, and Green, 2007, p. 103). The final part of the introduction was to ask if there were any questions.

The next stage of the group interview was what Cronin (2008, p. 239) calls the Opening Circle. This would usually be an opportunity for members of the group to introduce themselves, but because my participants knew each other, I used it as an opportunity to ask each member to describe their role in the church. Some participants found this easy as they spoke of being a Presbyter or Local Preacher, and it was more challenging for others who described themselves as an 'ordinary member' of the church. I asked the group two introductory questions, which were intended to offer a non-threatening way into the conversations: "What do you think the church is?" and "is church important to you?" This conversation led to the key questions for the group to consider: "Why did you choose to come to this church?"; "why do you keep coming here?"; "what is special about this church for you?"; "how has this church changed in your experience?"; "how do you discern the way the church should move forward?"; "how do you care for each other in the life of this church?"; "why are you a Methodist?" and "what makes your church Methodist?". Cronin asserts that 'why' questions can be unhelpful "because they presume that people always behave in a rational manner and can account for their behaviour in

this manner" (2008, p. 238). Despite this, in the pilot of the group interview, I found that participants responded well to the 'why' questions and interesting conversations emerged from the answer. Therefore, I used several 'why' questions to create a deeper understanding of the formation of each church community. The final stage in the group interview was to ask if any participant had anything they would like to add. As each group moved at a different speed, and the conversations moved in different directions, I maintained a linear framework which allowed me to keep a series of key questions forefront in the group sessions.

Following the first group interview, I began the member checking, for which I used transcript material to construct what Coralie McCormack calls an "interpretive story" (2012, p. 222), a narrative account of the key elements from the group discussion regarding the church's identity and corporate life. At the start of a second group interview, I provided the participants with a copy and asked them to reflect whether it was an accurate reflection of their story. I asked the groups to consider the account of the interview to avoid imposing a narrative on them, to allow them to reform it and make new connections. This enabled them to explore the way the church communicates its identity, which Hopewell describes as "code derived from the totality of forms and stories" (1987, p. 201) in a narrative form. Using a text drawn from the first group interviews was important to validate and test the findings allowing for any 'distortions' in the data to be checked and modified as necessary (Creswell, 2009, p. 191; Gauntlett, 2007, p. 101; Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p. 50). The participants were asked to consider the narrative from the first group and having heard their own words reflected back to them, given an opportunity to reject or amend them. This process was the core of the second group interview in each church, followed by a series of questions exploring issues from the narrative or the conversations that had taken place in the first interview. This research provided three pieces of evidence from each context: a transcript of the first and second group interviews which I refer to as the 'conversations', and the account of the first interview the participants considered in the second interview, which I refer to as 'the narrative'.

3.4 Sampling

The group interviews I conducted form the core of this research and were the best way to address my questions. In each research context, I sought between four and eight people to form a group interview; this was through self-selection to avoid any sense of coercion and allow people to feel secure in engaging with my research. I aimed to gather groups of participants who were committed to the life of each church. I did not specify that participants should be members of The Methodist Church, as it was more important that they felt they belonged to the local church community. Ultimately, those who took part in the group interviews in each church were members of The Methodist Church.

It was important that all participants self-selected for this research because I was asking the group to tell the church's stories. To do this effectively, the participants had to engage with one another, reflecting on shared stories to form their narrative. The participants needed to trust the group to hear and tell their stories freely. The members of each group belonged to the same church and knew each other well; there was, therefore, a level of trust and rapport between them. At the time of interviewing, I had been minister of these churches for seven years, and so had existing relationships with the participants. Therefore, my priority in the groups was not in establishing rapport with the participants and among the whole group, but rather ensuring that the interviews provided what Paul Ryan and Tony Dundon (2008, p. 444) describe as "meaningful dialogue that captures how respondents interpret their social world". In an interview, rapport is largely generated by the "immediate perception of the interviewees" (Goudy and Potter, 1975, p. 541). The shared characteristics or experience of interviewer and interviewee, properties of the interview, and the perceptions both parties have of the interview (Goudy and Potter, 1975, pp. 531 - 532) also affect the rapport generated and sustained. In this research, the participants and I had a shared interest and investment in the life of the church we were discussing, which enabled the conversation about the churches to flow comfortably. I was, however, concerned that my familiarity with the participants, as their minister, could have led to the assumption of knowledge and a lack of an appropriate critical voice regarding previous ministers or indeed my work within the churches. I was also concerned that there was a presumption that I would actively

lead the group and direct conversation, as this had been my role in other meetings and groups in the churches. To counter this, I attempted to limit my role to facilitating conversation and asking follow up questions; I adopted a position that was between unconditional positive regard and unconditional neutral regard.[15] In practice, this involved encouraging particpants as they shared stories and engaged in conversation, retaining the rapport of the group without appearing to indicate that some contributions were 'right' and others 'wrong'. Allison Abbe and Susan Brandon (2013, p. 239) note that while unconditional positive regard can sustain trust in an interview, it depends on positivity in all interactions. Unconditional neutral regard, as described by Wilshire and Brodsky, emerges from a desire to demonstrate unconditional positive regard for a person, but not necessarily their actions, and may be understood as "acceptance with equanimity" (2001, p. 157). Adopting this position was broadly successful, although I found that a positive response was often needed to encourage participants to continue telling their stories. In these cases, a neutral response may not have been helpful.

The groups formed in my research included the Superintendent Minister at Ripley Methodist Church and a retired Methodist Minister at Eltham Methodist. I felt this was a positive feature of the groups as it reflected the wider church communities where both these ministers were heavily involved. However, in forming the groups this way, there was potential that participants could defer to the ministers as they held leadership roles in the churches, if this were the case then their voices would have a controlling influence on the narratives created. It is inevitable that there would be issues surrounding power, as Bourdieu (1989, p. 16) comments social space contains "an ensemble of invisible relations", which to some extent group interviews or focus groups reflect, as Ayrton (2018, p. 13) notes. The methodology I developed could not remove the issues of power in a group setting but sought to limit that power by ensuring that all participants were treated as equal partners in the research. This meant that no one voice was allowed to dominate the conversations, and the narrative constructed through them. To do this, I used the member checking

[15] *Unconditional positive regard* is often located in therapeutic contexts and found in the work of Carl Rogers (1957), it is considered to be an attitude of "consistent acceptance and enduring warmth" (Mearns and Thorne, 1999, p. 64).

exercise described earlier, and I was careful to ensure that I communicated the features of my research to participants, often through informal conversation; as Bremborg (2014, p. 320) notes the purpose of this is to "equalise the power relation[s]" in the research. This allowed them the opportunity to challenge my conclusions, the way I presented their narratives, and enabled participants to be understood not as subjects in the research but as "equal partners in the process" (Gilbert, 2008, p. 105). In addition to this, within the group interviews, I did not use questions that were only to be answered by a particular group of people, since my methodology was designed to enable the co-creation of narrative, all questions were for the entire group. I did use individual questions, for instance, "why are you a Methodist?" and "what makes you remain a Methodist?" but these were answered by each participant in turn. This allowed each person to contribute a fragment of their story to the group, and each fragment was seen as equally valid revealing different, but not competing emphases. This pattern of co-creation was seen in other areas of the group interviews, for instance when Barbara, the project manager at Ripley Methodist, explained how members of the church who had been opposed to the church refurbishments all later changed their view. When the Superintendent Minister challenged this, Barbara reflected but did not concede the point, and the conversation allowed the narrative to be shaped by their interaction. Similarly, a conversation between Mick, the retired minister, and Evelyn, at Eltham Methodist, show their co-creation of the narrative at work. They discussed how the church would respond to people with different views sharing their life of their community. Evelyn argued that they would listen and welcome such a person, Mick does not disagree with or reject Evelyn's argument but furthers it saying they would try to "love them into the kingdom"; together Evelyn and Mick form a richer narrative. Throughout the group interviews, I made sure that all were offered the opportunity to contribute and share in the creation of narrative where all voices were equally important. This did not remove any power dynamics but sought to operate in such a way that they did not distort the work of the group.

I explained the process I would follow in the group interviews and how the data would be used to the participants, ensuring that when I cited individual contributions, these would be anonymised. I was aware, however, that despite analysing the data, it would be possible through deductive disclosure for someone reading my work to discover the context of the churches I had researched, and potentially some individuals in the process. Carolyn Ellis (1995) describes how participants were identified in her research causing tensions in those communities and between participants and herself. I recognised the potential for this in my research context, and so I sought to do what Laurel Richardson (1992) describes as communicating research in such a way that "lives are honoured and empowered, even if they and I see their worlds differently". Therefore, as I considered the data I attempted to consider those of whom I was writing as "an audience" (Ellis, 1995, p. 88), making sure there were opportunities for participants to consider their contributions and withdraw them if necessary. [16] When it came to writing up my work, I attempted to use the words and stories of participants carefully and sensitively.

My research question sought to uncover the narratives of each church; therefore, I required participants from each context who were willing to reflect the life of 'their' community. To avoid confusing this issue, I decided that a member of one group could not be a member of another group. This is particularly important to note when reflecting on Eltham Avenue Methodist church which closed in 2012, because some members moved to Sonning Methodist Church.

The ideal range of participants in group interviews is usually between five and fifteen people (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, 2011; Rabiee, 2004; Silver, 2008). Rosaline Barbour (2007, p. 59) however, notes that a large group is not necessarily better than a small group, as it allows a depth of conversation and related experiences to emerge which is harder to achieve in a larger group. I aimed to create groups of between four and eight participants; I judged that a minimum of four people was necessary to

[16] When I offered opportunities for participants to hear their contributions and share in my research I encountered a "disinterested" (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1637) response, I persisted in providing such opportunities but this made me more aware of how my participants would read and recognise themselves the final text.

allow significant conversations to take place. This number is less than suggested above but due to the nature of the smaller churches I was working with, a significant number of the members were elderly and unable to engage in the group interviews due to poor health. I limited the maximum number of each group to eight people, as Barbour (p. 60) suggests, to allow sufficient depth in conversation and interaction. I was concerned that the groups would be an honest reflection of the churches but felt ultimately this was achieved.

Sonning Methodist Church was the largest of the three I studied, the group consisted of six participants. Simon, in his early seventies, is the church Property Steward and is married to Rebecca who is in her mid-sixties and is the Senior Church Steward. They have been members of the church for over thirty years. Jenny is in her early sixties and joined the church less than five years ago; she described herself as "just volunteering where needed". Brenda, who is in her late seventies, is the Church Council Secretary and an "ordinary member" of the church for over fifty years. Audrey is in her mid-seventies and a Vestry Steward, she had been a member of the church for forty years. The final participant was Elaine, who, in her mid-fifties, decided to move churches and had been part of Sonning for two years. She described herself as someone who "goes to different groups". The participants reflected the makeup of the church quite well, being predominantly female and over sixty and holding a range of roles.

Ripley Methodist had a membership of eight, and the group consisted of four members. Barbara who is in her mid-forties has been a member of the church for twenty years and is a Local Preacher and the manager of the Playhouse. Richard is in his early sixties and the Superintendent Minister of the local Methodist Circuit, he is part of the management committee of the Playhouse. Irene, in her mid-sixties, was brought to the church as a child by her mother and described herself as someone who "helps on a Saturday" with parties and attends acts of worship. Anna, who is in her mid-forties, joined the church when it was converted into the Playhouse, and attends worship services at the church. This group was a good reflection of the church, as it included those who were involved in the governance and in weekly activities. The members of the church who were of working age had become

involved in the Playhouse activities while many older members were not able to attend.

There were nine former members of Eltham Avenue Methodist church, and the group consisted of four members. Mick, in his early seventies, is a retired Methodist Minister and had come to the church five years ago on his retirement. Sue was in her late sixties and a Local Preacher, she had been part of the church for six years. Evelyn was in her mid-eighties and had been brought to the church as a child, she had taken on many roles in the church but had "retired" from these in the last few years. Gill was in her early sixties and had been part of the church for ten years, attending with her husband. I felt that the group was missing one significant person – Frank, who had been heavily involved in the life and leadership of the church for over twenty years but decided he was not interested in participating.

I decided that I would not reject anyone who expressed an interest in my research, if there were too many people for a particular group, I would invite the first eight people who offered. Using this method across the three groups meant I was not actively choosing participants for the group interviews, and therefore not pre-empting the narrative that could be created. However, because I knew the members of the three congregations, I knew the people who had been part of the church's story, often for many years. This was the reason I was surprised that Frank did not show any interest in participating in my research. I knew he had been a member of the church for a long time and had held many different offices, and I felt he would have wanted to be part of a group which reflected on the church's story. It was not the case that I felt Frank should be involved in the narrative creation or had a particular right to be involved in its shaping. My methodology rested on the concept that the participants in the group interviews are co-creators of the narratives, and indeed through their interaction, they could function as "'co-moderators' and even 'co-analysts'" (Barbour, 2007, p. 136) in the group. The strength of the group method was, as Neitz (2014, p. 57) notes, that the shared discourse of the group provides the tools for meaning-making. The group worked with fragments from each participant to form their narrative of place. The method I used placed each participant on an equal footing in the group. Therefore, if I had decided that Frank

had a perspective I wanted to hear in the process, the methodology I had developed meant that any perspective Frank brought would not be simply and uncritically accepted by the group in their narrative process. Even though I would have liked Frank to take part in my research, his lack of interest meant that he did not, this demonstrates that I did not pressure anyone to be involved if they chose not to.

3.5 Analysis

To analyse the material from the group interviews, I used narrative inquiry, which understands people as the "embodiments of lived stories" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 43) and seeks to understand them. Narrative inquiry has been criticised for "not being theoretical enough" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 42) as it begins with the subjective experience of participants and seeks connections and themes in those narratives and stories. There is also a tension between generalisation and attention to specific details (Riessman, 1993, p. 70) in narrative research, as a researcher attempts to chart a path which attends to both. However, narrative inquiry offers insight to "interpret and experience the world of the participant rather than try to explain or predict that world", as Carol Chunfeng Wang and Sara Kathleen Galen (2015, p. 196) note. I found that narrative research provided a methodology to hear and record the stories participants told and make sense of their narratives.

The primary model of analysis I used is taken from the work of Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach and Tamar Zilber (1998). They describe four modes to engage with narrative: *Holistic-content,* which looks for meaning in the narrative as a whole, themes are marked as they emerge and their development in the whole narrative is considered (pp. 62-87). *Holistic-form* again treats the narrative as a whole, but here the progression of the narrative is identified, and its formation and structure are considered (pp. 88-111). *Categorical-form* analyses stylistic or linguistic characteristics of defined sections of narrative, asking how each category marked for analysis is enlightened by its particular form (pp. 141-164). *Categorical-content* breaks the narrative into small units which are then analysed. The themes are set through the research questions and the narrative examined for these themes, or indeed the lack of them (pp. 112-149). Therefore, since themes of my research were set by the questions, the most appropriate model of analysis was the categorical-

content mode, because I am interested in the way the narrative constructed through the group interview process illuminates the lived experience of church in that context. Since narratives are complex and multi-faceted, the categorical-content mode allowed me to explore the themes that emerged in the narratives and consider how they interacted.

The categorical-content (Lieblich et al., 1998, pp. 112 - 114) mode has four stages. Firstly, the selection of a subtext: here the parts of the narrative that relate directly to the research theme are highlighted. Therefore, in my research, I highlighted parts of the data which explored identity, ecclesiology and Methodism. Secondly, the definition of the content categories, here the themes emerging from the narratives and the way they are expressed within the narrative account are examined and clarified. This leads to the third stage, when the categories are selected, and the material is sorted accordingly to provide a sense of coherence, allowing insights to be gathered. Finally, the data is used to draw conclusions; here the content categories are used to explore the research findings. The categorical-content mode is itself subjective, as Lieblich et al (1998, p. 138) acknowledge, it can be perceived as an impressionistic hermeneutic approach. It can, however, "reach the more profound realms of understanding lives and experiences" (1998, p. 139) through acknowledging, and working with the subjective material.

To work with this subjectivity, I used a second method to explore the transcribed material. This was the categorisation model suggested by Lyn Richards (2015). She describes a process of "thinking up" (p. 131) from the research data. Here, links are made by reflecting on interesting aspects of the narrative and interrogating it asking "where does it go" (p. 132) in relation to the broader research themes. Using this model, I created a flow of connected categories and subcategories, which allowed me to consider how various aspects of the narratives relate to the whole. This model does not require that every category is included in the final scheme, rather it allowed me to reflect on which themes were central to my research and how these interact in the data.

3.6 Ethical issues

My research involves working with groups of people from churches where I was the minister, there were, therefore, a number of ethical concerns to be addressed. Before my research could begin, I sought ethical clearance from the university. Obtaining clearance required that participants were given a participant information sheet and consent form[17], these, along with a careful introduction to the group interviews, ensured informed consent. This acknowledged participants' rights to know how their data is used in the research and subsequently stored securely (Cresswell, 2015, p. 89), but also clarified the privacy and confidentiality of the group interviews (Fox et al., 2007, p. 103). As part of providing informed consent, participants were given contact details for appropriate university and Methodist Church authorities if they wished to make a complaint about my practice. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from the interviews at any point without prejudice, and without disclosing their reasons. This was to address any perceived power imbalance between myself as researcher and the participants as "researched" (Silver, 2008, p. 105). During my research I was also minister of the churches, it was therefore important to ensure that participants held the power over their data and participation.

One concern was how any potential disagreement among participants would be handled. Such disagreement could be disruptive in the church's life and would need to be handled sensitively as I was both minster and researcher. Therefore, in the introduction to the group interview sessions, I explained that the aim of the research process was not to agree on everything, but rather to tell the story of that church together acknowledging that stories are expressed and interpreted differently; this was to emphasise that each participant's voice was privileged, and as Cronin (2008, p. 240) shows, interactive discussion is necessary to achieve the best results in a group interview. In addition to this, I needed to take steps to ensure appropriate pastoral care of participants was in place. Therefore, I arranged for another minister to be available to speak confidentially with participants if they felt they could not speak with me.

[17] See appendix A and B.

In this research I acknowledge the complexities of my place as an insider-outsider, by maintaining a critical distance. This is not a disinterested or disengaged position, but rather as Knott describes a "dialogical and reflexive engagement" (2005, p. 255) between myself as the researcher and the communities I research. In each of the churches researched, I am an 'insider' because I am part of those communities as the Methodist minister in pastoral charge. As such it was necessary to operate with significant reflexivity; a self-awareness which enabled me to evaluate my impact on the research process and my reaction to the material produced through the research (Mason, 2002, p. 5). I aimed to take the position Kim Knott calls "observer as participant" (2005, p. 246), as I was aware it would be impossible to be objective and 'outside' the narrative process. However, Sonya Dwyer and Jennifer Buckle note that the insider-outsider dynamic is more complex because

> the intimacy of qualitative research no longer allows us to remain true outsiders … and, because of our role as researchers, it does not qualify us as complete insiders (2009, p. 61).

Narrative inquiry is concerned with exposing the stories of community, it creates public stories out of community stories. In the process of hearing stories and constructing narratives, a researcher cannot be entirely uninvolved as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note. Rather, a researcher must approach these narratives critically, acknowledging their role and place. The researcher "cannot take a neutral or value-free position in the research. The aim is still to be objective but there is a recognition that this is impossible" (Fox et al., 2007, p. 11). Throughout the group interview process, I attempted to operate in a way that allowed the participants to control the way they shared data together, limiting my interference in the process as much as I could. I felt this was successful and the participants were given the power to control the data they shared and reflected on.

My critical engagement was maintained throughout the research process by conversations with 'critical friends', two Methodist ministers, from different parts of

the county who challenged my practice and assumptions. I met with them after the first round of group interviews to reflect on the themes emerging from the research. This allowed me to step back and hear how others responded as I described my initial findings and clarify the issues I would return to in the second group interviews.

Through my research process I used the checklist suggested by Fox, Martin and Green (2007, p. 188) which suggests questions for reflection in each stage of the research process: pre-research stage, research design and data collection, data analysis and writing up. I also provided a member checking exercise, which allowed the participants to hear their words reflected to them, leading to them questioning the words they used. This was a helpful step as it provided a way of checking that I was not using their words inappropriately and was able to explore them in more detail.

3.7 Summary

I used narrative inquiry to examine the shared experience of the three churches I studied. Using a series of two group interviews, I provided opportunities for self-selecting members of each community to engage with the research and express narratives of place with other members of their church. These narratives of place afford an insight into the self-understanding of these communities and allow me to outline the nature of lived Methodism in these communities.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCOVERING PLACE

Methodist identity is most often considered in a top-down manner, which, as discussed in Chapter Two, presumes that a general appreciation of Methodism will translate to the expression of a local Methodist church. However, identity is expressed and sustained in narrative, formed through the lived experience of its author or authors. Using contributions of participants, the following four chapters outline how the three churches in my research narrate their shared identity, and how this discloses the nature of lived Methodism through the narrative of place.

This chapter suggests how the narrative of place emerges from my research and shows its significance. Space has a powerful influence in shaping experience, as the effect of the physical characteristics of a given space on an individual or group and the socially constructed relationships interact, forming a 'sense of place'. The term 'sense of place' is defined and used in a range of ways across disciplines, Convey, Corsane and Davis argue that despite different usage, there is shared consensus. They claim that

> place, as distinct from space, provides a profound centre of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties and is part of the complex processes through which individual and groups define themselves (2012, p. 1).

In this work I am using 'sense of place' to reflect the way space becomes meaningful to people, enabling reflection on their identity. The three churches in my research have differently-sized congregations; operate with different patterns of worship; and their buildings are physically different, yet there is a 'sense of place' in each context which is more than merely an appreciation of the space of their church. I argue that these churches share a way of understanding and articulating their life: this is the

narrative of place. It is concerned with more than forms of words and conventions; it reveals a way of 'being church' operating in the three congregations and a way of structuring their narratives. I contend that through the narrative of place, the three churches in my research locate and understand themselves as 'church' and 'Methodist'.

In this chapter, I will suggest the way place functions as a motif, helping the participants in my research to appreciate their belonging, purpose, and value within a church community. This understanding of the narrative of place will set the scene for my discussion of its three key elements, place and community, place and memory, and place and tradition in the following chapters.

4.1 Space and Place

Space and place are not the same, yet they are connected because it is impossible to speak of place without first speaking of space. I understand space as a physical location in which people interact in community, it is, as Tim Cresswell (2015, p. 16) explains, "a realm without meaning … which produces the basic coordinates for human life". Place is not necessarily physical or visible but "become[s] vividly real … by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life" (Tuan, 1977, p. 178). When an individual's 'space' becomes a way of enabling interpretation and reflection, it allows their "seeing and knowing [of] the world" (Cresswell, 2015, p. 18). In his reflections, Yi–Fu Tuan proposes that it is helpful to understand "place as pause" (1977, p. 198). He suggests that if time is understood as movement or flow, then place becomes the way stability is created: locating people in places that hold significance and meaning, therefore articulating identity in the midst of continually changing contexts. Tuan notes that the "intensity of experience" (p. 198) is more important than the time spent in a space, it is this which enables place to be given power. In this research, the seeing and knowing that place provides is created through experience in particular spaces; giving meaning and enabling members to understand their place within the church.

I was the minister of the three churches in this research between 2008 and 2016. These churches functioned as 'spaces', that were within three miles of each other,

and historically represented two different Methodist traditions, yet each had a strong sense of place. This was more than valuing their buildings and those who were part of the church and its life together. In each of these three churches, when participants were asked to describe *the* church, they told stories about *their* church, through the sense of place that the group shared.

In the group interview at Sonning Methodist, Simon, who is the property steward, comments:

> the most important part of that church to me is the prayer room upstairs ... [I] often go up there and sit there quietly [and] there's just something ... in that room, whereby you seem to go out of your own sense.

For Simon, the physical space of the church building allows a connection with the transcendent, a connection with a deeper understanding of place, where his faith is engaged and realised. Simon's comments began a conversation about the building; the group agreed that though it is not the most important thing to them, they still retain a special concern for it. This position is described by Rebecca, a church steward:

> you don't need a building, do you? … you don't need a special building ... but … the building is important to you simply because ... it sort of says… this is a special place this is where we worship God' ... and we want it to be nice … it says ... we love you, and so we want a nice place to worship ... offering it to God.

Simon and Elaine both value the church building. Simon shares a conversion experience which he locates in a particular space within that building: "It was ... five to ten at night in [the] Sunday school room … and I still can't tell you now what

happened to me, but from then on ... I were [sic] totally committed". Elaine, who had joined the church in the last few years reflected on her impressions. "you can't actually … put your finger on what it is ... it's that ... just that *something* ... that is special". The nature of the 'special' quality that Elaine and Simon sense in their building is not clear, though it is linked to the experience of that place. Rebecca characterises the interrelationship between building and congregation, forming that 'special' quality:

> [while] it's true to say that the building is not the church, but the building definitely changed our church [group agreement] - the people being the church - definitely changed our church.

The change from space to place is brought about by the actions of the church community: 'being the church' invests the space with power and effects a change.

The 'something special' that Elaine recognises at Sonning Methodist is also experienced by those in the other two churches. At Ripley Methodist Church, Barbara describes the changes to the building that had, for some, revealed its special or spiritual qualities:

> [Brian] the caretaker … said something changed in the building the day the playhouse opened, because for the first time he experienced … a spiritual element in the building.

The group continued to reflect on how changes to the building had heightened the spiritual dimension of their place. Irene spoke of when the 'new' church opened, "a lot of people asked to come … and spend some quiet time", this enabled people to see 'their' church in a new way. This was particularly clear in Anna's experience,

> Barbara said, “Oh we’re opening the Playhouse in October half term, will you come and give us a hand?” and I said “I’ll come [and] give you two days ‘cause it’s my school holiday” ... I walked through the door, and I just went ‘wow’, and spent the week.

This new understanding of the church led Richard to reflect on what the changes to the building had done. He explains,

> the vision is about making it acceptable to a far broader group of people ... who … don’t feel that they’re being steamrollered into a particular understanding of what church is.

This conversation led the group back to consider whether Ripley Methodist could exist in another place, recognising that their building does something special. Richard expresses this:

> [Ripley] works because it’s in somewhere that has been used as a church for a long period of time … a special place. If we took it from here and just put it somewhere else, would it still work in the same way? … the building makes a difference.

As the space of the church was changed, it allowed a new sense of place to emerge. The group at Eltham also explored how the ‘special’ quality of their space was not necessarily enhanced when the building was developed, but it was preserved. Evelyn, a long-standing member of Eltham Avenue, explains,

> well, it was just special, that's all I can say ... and made more special with funerals of my mum and dad … and my wedding there, it was the first wedding after we altered it.

These important experiences in Evelyn's life cause her to invest that place with a prominent position in her identity narrative. The fabric of the building is important, as Katie Day notes,

> bricks and mortar, doors and windows, steeples and altars are not neutral or random elements of a shelter for a worshipping people. Rather, all these elements are dynamically related to the religious identity of the faith community (2014, p. 30).

However, the building alone is not sufficient to create place.

The spaces religious groups inhabit may be considered 'sacred' places because of the nature of the experience there; this illuminates the perception of them as 'special'. Recognising space as sacred often happens unconsciously through the actions and experiences of people as they go about their daily lives (Day, 2014, p. 41). John Inge (2003) claims that a renewed understanding of the sacramental experience of place within the Christian tradition would explain how church buildings are perceived to be 'special'. He argues that the place in which an individual has a sacramental encounter holds a significance for them (pp. 89 - 90). A space becomes holy when an individual's experience, or their perception of it, moves them to name it as a place where an encounter with the 'other' could take place. Space that is understood as 'special' may be thus be considered holy.

A sense of place helps a person to understand the world in which they live. "There is no pure seeing" Hjalmarson (2015, p. 132) comments, 'seeing' is predicated on experience and the interpretation of that experience which is always performed in place. Place is developed in conversation with Ripley Methodist Church when

Richard, the Superintendent Minister, reflects on the value of acceptance and belonging within a church:

> [it is a] sense of being ... encompassed ... in a body of people, who actually care about you, even if they don't care whether you believe in the virgin birth or not … you know that you've a set of common ... beliefs, values that you can trust, and therefore you can trust that body of people ... without that… then church ceases to have any meaning.

For Richard, the values of trust and belonging are found in the experience of place, which allow him to appreciate the meaning of the church. Walter Brueggemann, reflecting on a biblical perspective on place, notes:

> place is a space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment and undefined freedom (1977, pp. 4-5).

Brueggemann recognises that the connections individuals form consciously and subconsciously, and the value placed on particular events and experiences, are formative in the sense of place, as Inge notes, "human experience is shaped by place" (2003, p. ix).

Attempting to understand the complex relationships forming a sense of place is no easy task. Thomas Tweed (2006) reflects on an exilic space in a Cuban immigrant community in America, that was created as their response to losing the previous space they inhabited, and the sense of place that belonged there. Tweed has constructed a number of different categories by which place becomes meaningful.

The first of these is *locative:* all such groups "emerge from within categorical schemes and social contexts. It only makes sense to talk about reality-for-us, and questions about what's real or true make sense only within a socially constructed cluster of categories" (p. 16). Secondly, the *translocative* category understands that the experience of religious communities can be considered as 'flows'. Tweed comments, "sacred flows cross space-time ... religions also are simultaneously individualistic and collective" (2006, p. 64). The *translocative* mode allows a community to connect multiple narratives in its life. Finally, Tweed explains the *supra-locative* mode: this "presupposes that the interpreter is everywhere at once or nowhere in particular ... a 'God's Eye point of view." However this perspective is framed, it assumes a position beyond any fixed point and outside all categorical schemes" (p. 16). The *supra-locative* functions as a reflective category, allowing communities to appreciate their space and reflect on its societal investment. Tweed recognises that experience of the *locative*, *translocative* and *supralocative* dimensions of place are disclosed through the "narratives, artefacts, and practices" (p. 17) of those communities. A church community develops a sense of place which draws on these multi-layered experiences, enabling that community to 'know itself' with greater clarity. The space in which people exist leads to complex understandings and reflections on their 'place'. I suggest that the participants in my research construct narratives of identity through their experience of place; Tweed demonstrates there are different ways that place informs that experience.

In my research, Tweed's modes are fluid rather than understood separately, participants move through them as they consider their place, and may simultaneously reflect in multiple modes. The narrative of place demonstrates how communities create meaning for their participants through a locative mode, shown in Richard's belief that his belonging is understood in place, or Evelyn's experience of funerals and weddings creating meaning in her place. The participants in my research also exhibit the translocative mode as different stories and narratives are told, yet they are held within the corporate experience. The ways place is formed cannot be easily described, it is a complex picture which Manuel Vásquez recognises when he

argues that humans are "bodies within a web of narratives" (2011, p. 269).[18] Each of these affect an individual's experience of the space they inhabit, because that space is mediated by the societal context. This reflects Tweed's understanding of the translocative, as Vásquez claims these narratives "cannot be reduced to geophysical properties afforded to the believer. Nor … understood as a purely social or semiotic act. It is rather the interplay between multiple materialities" (2011, p. 317). Within the life of a community, these are negotiated, forming a complex experience of place. When considering a church community, this challenges the idea that a religion can be treated as a 'text' to be read and interpreted. Rather, it affirms that religion, and a community's expression of religion, should be understood through the embodied practices and narratives that operate in that space, both individual and collective. The experience of religion in a community is more than words, or practices, in a particular space; it is revealed in the lived experience of that community. The space in which people operate, which can itself be a complex synthesis of social relationships and physical realities, offers experiences from which place is created. For the participants in my work, the understanding of themselves as 'the church' is developed through the spaces they inhabit, which *do* something among them, allowing the web of narratives to interact and create 'something special'. Tweed's supra-locative mode explores how a community understands itself in the context of the world around it. However, it can seem limited as Tweed suggests it is based on the notion that there is "one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'" (2006, p. 16), which a community discovers through "correspondence between worlds and external things" (Tweed, 2006, p. 16). In my work, the supra-locative functions as a way of reflecting on how the external world changes the internal world of the community, as members come and go. The sense of place changes as different

[18] Within practical theology the complexity of lived experience is recognised by Ruard Ganzevoort who argues that "supporting connections" (2009) between praxis, tradition and sources enables a fuller understanding of how an individual's life and faith interact. Bonnie Miller-Mclemore (1993, 2012, 2018) describes the living human web as metaphor for human interaction, revealing the need to recognise the shaping influences on a practitioner. This allows them to attend to ignored voices and narratives to transform practice. In this way the task of practical theology is in understanding the complexity of place and seeking renewed practice within it.

people engage in the life of the community and, through their shared experience, shape and reshape it.

A 'sense of place' is created and sustained within a set of complex inter-relationships in a particular space. Tweed and Vasquez illuminate some of the processes at work in this and provide a way of knowing in place. My work examines how the sense of place is expressed through the narratives the three churches construct, as such it provides a way of communicating their shared experiences.

4.2 The Narrative of Place

Through the narrative of place, the churches express themselves and their way of being. Their 'sense of place' allows participants to understand the church to which they belong, and their experience of lived Methodism in that context.

There are a number of Christian theologians who reflect on the importance of place to Christian communities (Hjalmarson, 2015; Inge, 2003; Sheehy, 2007). They tend to focus on understanding place as a response to the incarnation of Christ, who enters the space of humanity to reveal the divine. This suggests that church is understood as a missionary enterprise, in which participants communicate their experience of the divine to those around them. However, the three church communities in my research recognise the importance of place as more than a reflection of a realised faith in the Christological incarnation, or as the natural outworking of that emphasis. The space of their church is where they have invested time and energy in forming and maintaining relationships, which have affirmed a sense of belonging, and their experience of the sacramental (Inge, 2003, p. 89) has led them to consider that particular space as 'holy'.

The group from Sonning Methodist church reflects on the importance of 'their' church, which they felt was strengthened when they visited other churches. Rebecca explains, "I can go into different churches … I can still enjoy that worship ... [but] this is where I belong ... 'cause you make your family, church family here don't [you?]" Elaine attempted to further justify this position, "I don't think it's something you can always necessarily put your finger on ... it's a feeling ... that ... makes you think this, this is where I belong". Gill, from Eltham Avenue Methodist, believes that her local

church is more than simply a place where she belongs, “it’s part of your life isn’t it … part of what you are, what you do, what you think, how you behave isn’t it really? ... very important”. Evelyn described her experience of Eltham Avenue and why she valued that experience of one space over another:

> I felt part of it, where ... in a bigger church where you get a lot of people ... it’s alright, and you enjoy it, and you feel stirred by it … but ... there's something about small churches that you feel ... more intensely ... part of it.

Evelyn valued the experiences she had in the Eltham Avenue ‘space’ because she felt valued and ‘part’ of the experience. For Evelyn, church is not simply understood as a missional concept, demonstrating incarnational ministry in its village, it is a place where she is valued, and her experiences were invested with power.

Place has a significant impact on participants from the three local church communities in my research. It is the way they express identity, and acts as a structure for the narratives they construct as they reflect on the purpose and identity of their churches. I call this the Narrative of Place. This has three distinct elements: *place and community*, *place and memory*, and *place and tradition*. Through the narrative of place, the experience of the churches is related, this experience is Methodist. Therefore, the narrative of place reveals the shared experience of lived Methodism.

CHAPTER FIVE

PLACE AND COMMUNITY

The narrative of place is expressed through an understanding of community, memory and tradition. In continuing the search for an understanding of lived Methodism, the following three chapters will examine these themes in detail. In this chapter, I begin by demonstrating the way the three churches order themselves, and the way they enact 'community'. To do this, I use Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* to illuminate the narrative experience communicated by the participants in my research. The habitus of the church communities I have studied influences the boundaries and membership of those groups, the mode of interpretation, and quality of relationships within the churches to create a way of being which is expressed in the narrative of place. The emphasis on community is one facet of the narrative of place that reveals the lived experience of these Methodist churches. An appreciation of community leads to a consideration in Chapter Six of how memory functions to sustain the churches, and in Chapter Seven how Methodist tradition is appropriated in this context.

5.1 Habitus and the "Rules of the Game".

Habitus, as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 95), is a social process in which groups of people construct a set of 'rules' which govern their practice. Bourdieu describes habitus as "an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (1977, p. 95). These schemes become internalised and enable members of a cultural group or community to know how to act within that context. Habitus is produced by experience, or as Bourdieu explains,

> by experience of the game, and therefore of the objective structures within which it is played out, the 'feel for the game' is what gives the game

> a subjective sense - a meaning and a *raison d'etre*, but also a direction, [and] an orientation (1990, p. 66).

This habitus is not inflexible, it engages with the questions and challenges of the developing context and offers new practices that are within the 'rules of the game'. Habitus is expressed in corresponding ways in each of the churches I have studied, it enables an understanding of the expression of community where a lived Methodism may be realised.

Bourdieu understands habitus as an unconscious second nature or "enacted belief" (1990, p. 66), which is taken for granted, and "carries the body along with it" (1990, p. 66). Habitus is created in the structure of experience of life within a society or community, which itself becomes a "structuring structure" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 15) for members of those communities:

> habitus are structured structures, generative principles of distinct and distinctive practice ... habitus are also structuring structures, different classifying schemes classifying principles, different principles of vision and division ... habitus makes different differences, they implement distinctions (1996, p. 17).

Habitus makes the distinctions between different cultures, societal groups and communities clear, as these differences are lived out in their structured practices and demonstrate the self-imposed ideological limits of these groupings. These limits may, however, be created unconsciously through the habitus rather than a deliberate attempt to exclude or outlaw variants. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu explores how different groups in French culture demonstrate separation in their attitudes and practices and the effect of their habitus in revealing these separations. He comments:

> the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application - beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt (1984, p. 166).

While Bourdieu often speaks of habitus as being learned in childhood, he does note that when an individual enters a particular social field, for instance, the scientific, political, artistic, or religious fields, they must develop the appropriate habitus (1991, p. 176). A social field or community group may develop a habitus of its own, which requires initiation and apprenticeship, within the broader societal context. The habitus is a product of the history of the grouping it is formed in, which is realised in schemes of practice and perspective within those groups. These schemes enable members of such groupings to determine which practices are 'correct', and which challenge those notions of 'correctness' (1990, pp. 54-55). The habitus has an infinite potential to produce or realise new perspectives and actions, but these are held within the limits

> set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

The groups in which habitus is enacted are bound by the limits of the structure they enact, which becomes an "embodied history" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 57).

Bourdieu's understanding of habitus can seem to restrict the way a person acts, denying them the possibly of change or growth, by requiring that their actions are always in line with the habitus. Richard Jenkins (1982, p. 273) recognises this criticism, characterising the habitus as a "deterministic model" which is inescapably

cyclical. He writes, “structures produce the habitus, which generates practice, which reproduces the structures” (1982, p. 273). Jeffrey Alexander makes a similar criticism, claiming that habitus creates “an endless and circular account of objective structures structuring subjective structure that structure objective structures in turn” (1995, p. 138). Bourdieu responds by arguing that individuals always retain some agency over the habitus: “social agents will actively determine, on the basis of these socially and historically constituted categories of perception and appreciation, the situation that determines them” (1992, p. 136). The ability to reflect on the effect of the habitus and how it may be shaped as different people engage with it becomes a strength. It ensures that the structures reproduced by the habitus are not unmoving, as Diane Reay (2004, p. 440) notes, this “makes possible adaptation rather than the more constricting straightforward adoption of the concept”. Equally when a group of people share a social place there is a process of negotiation within that group, creating a dynamic in which change is possible and indeed inevitable, as Anthony King (2000, p. 431) remarks, “social life is … always necessarily open to strategic transformation”. The structuring influence of the habitus is realised in the life of a community or society, expressed in their actions or perspectives; this does not mean it creates an inescapable cycle of repetitive structuring. Rather, the full value of Bourdieu’s habitus may be found in the investigation into the structuring structures it allows (Nash, 2002, pp. 45-46).

Habitus allows individuals to inhabit institutions, know the ‘rules of the game’, and be creative within them, even offering the possibility that the rules may be transcended. For Bourdieu, habitus has profoundly transformative power on those who enact it. He writes, the

> habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of a power relation, into a system of perceived differences … whose objective truth is misrecognised (1984, p. 172).

Bourdieu acknowledges that habitus is not simply a conceptual notion; it must be worked out in lived belief or practical faith. These practices "constitute investments in the collective experience of creating symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86), and therefore the lived experience of the habitus strengthens the unconscious habitus held in community, as the practices are "inseparable from belonging to the field" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86) which is held in the influence of the habitus. Practical belief, argues Bourdieu, "is not a state of mind, but rather a state of body" (1990, p. 86), it is the outworking of the habitus in the life of the whole person. The danger of this perspective is highlighted by Richard Jenkins (1992, pp. 71, 83), who questions Bourdieu's emphasis on the unconscious nature of the habitus at the expense of conscious decision making. Assuming that the habitus has absolute power over experience denies an individual the opportunity to "intervene in their own history" (1992, p. 83), and therefore grants the habitus a power which cannot be challenged or reframed. The habitus, however, is formed through the lived experience of a community, and therefore the narratives the community constructs are informed through their habitus. As a community changes over time, the lived experience allows the habitus to be reconsidered and new narratives to emerge.

In this work, I am forwarding the notion of lived Methodism, and therefore suggesting how the concept of habitus informs that experience. I have argued that identity is formed and expressed through narratives that reflect on the author's experience of place. In my research, place allows participants a way of understanding their church and their faith in that context. Religion is more than 'words', it is concerned with the whole life of an individual, which is affected by their place. Bourdieu's habitus provides a way to grasp how the practices and enacted faith of a community enable their identity narratives to be told with integrity, because they reflect the community life that the habitus sustains.

The narrative of place reveals shared experience in the three churches I have studied and highlights what lived Methodism looks like in this context. As the narrative of place is formed, the habitus operating in these communities is disclosed through participants articulating their experience of church. An exploration of the habitus offers a way to appreciate the core values espoused within this expression of

community. I propose to understand the habitus as providing the 'rules of the game' which allows for interpretation of the context in which the church communities exist and suggests appropriate praxis in that context. However, it is a habitus which is challenged and reformed by the experience of the community. It is not a habitus which strictly defines the nature of experience, rather it is continually developing and growing with the shifting dynamic of the church community. The core values of community in my research are concerned with boundaries, interpretation, and relationships. These sustain the expression of community within the narrative of place.

5.2 Community and Boundaries

A community of people creates boundaries for their group that express what they understand it means to belong. The participants from the three churches express their understanding of boundaries as part of the habitus they enact. The boundaries that the three church communities in my research create seem to make clear and rigid distinctions about who is 'in' and who is 'out'. While they may be understood as theological or practical distinctions, these boundaries are more fluid than it initially appears. The boundaries clarify the nature of an individual's interaction in that community, and also function as an invitation for 'outsiders' to participate in the life of the community.

When asked 'what is the church?' members of group interviews in the three congregations claim it is a group of 'like-minded" people. This is expressed in slightly different ways: "like-minded people" says Jenny at Sonning Methodist; "like-believers" says Evelyn at Eltham Avenue. However, "like-minded" appears to be a criterion for acceptance within a church group, and a way of offering clarity over the created or imposed boundaries.

This use of "like-minded" was explored in conversations, where Richard, the superintendent Methodist Minister at Ripley Methodist Church, argued that within the church he felt "encompassed ... in a body of people, who actually care about you". Richard's understanding of "like-minded" is about investment in community as well as a shared theology, revealed in a mutual trust within that body of people,

which has a powerful effect as he claims it is through this that an honest community is formed. While Richard argues that a dogmatic adherence to theological principles is not necessary to be part of the church, he maintains that trust is made possible through shared belief, which holds the community together. In the second group interview, the participants from Ripley Methodist were uncomfortable with their use of "like-minded" from their first group interview, suggesting a different phrase: "people who all believe in Jesus". The group acknowledged, "we are complex people, and we might be like-minded in some areas but unlike-minded in other". In this case, the community is defined by what Richard calls a "common basis of faith"; this is not explicitly communicated but is found in the experience of the community and in the sense of trust that he highlights. Richard comments, "it becomes a question whether you can actually ... catch or trust the vision, or you can't". Catching the vision of the community allows a person to engage and find belonging within it; at that point, the sense of belonging requires further investment. Barbara, the Ripley Playhouse manager, comments, "it's only the people that it belongs to who see their part in actually sustaining it". In this sense, the "like-minded" people are those who acknowledge their ownership and part in the co-authoring of the community itself. The conversation at Sonning Methodist Church characterises some of the key elements in this shared belief; these are: belief in Jesus Christ, prayer, being with other people and belonging to a church family. The common basis of faith which unites the church is found in sharing the 'vision' and in actively belonging to the community.

The use of "like-minded" does create boundaries for the churches, but these are not impenetrable, rather they reflect commitment to, and engagement with, the community. In his study of Biblical discipleship and formation, Roger Walton (2014) claims that disciples are formed in action; by *being* disciples people *become* disciples. This picture of community and engagement extends to the churches in my research, where "like-minded" functions as an invitation to engage with and share in the life of the church community.

The group from Eltham Avenue Methodist Church recognises the importance of engagement. Evelyn begins, noting that the church is a group of "like-believers," who

share “worship and fellowship with one another” continues Sue. Mick, a retired Methodist minister, develops this theme by arguing that the church is a group of people “on a common wavelength ... I mean we might all be wrong”. For Mick, the cohesion of the community is more pressing than whether the shared ‘wavelength’ is ‘right’ or not. The group then considers how they would respond to someone who wasn’t “like-minded” entering their community. Evelyn, who was brought up at the church comments, “we'd hear what they said, and what they thought differently”, and Mick added that the church would “try to love them into the kingdom”. Those who disagree are not excluded from the community but required to understand its life to enter fully into it. In the group at Sonning Methodist Church, Rebecca claimed the church is a place “where you meet with fellow Christians, where you're all of one mind”. Jenny, who had joined the church five years previously, explained “you know, you need to be uplifted, you need to have some teaching … and, speak to ... like-minded people”, she explains further that she needs to be part of a church because “there's no way that I could not be with like-minded Christians”. Jenny’s place within the church, and indeed her faith, is enriched by the life of the community. Elaine, who also joined the church quite recently, comments that the church is not an exclusive group, but concerned with “accepting people however they are”, so that they are free to experience the enrichment the community offers. With this in mind, the comments Jenny makes in this fragment carry a more inclusive resonance than it may seem at first: “we are all like-minded, but really ... we should be having people in who are not like-minded ... getting people in, who are not like us, because we need to get them to be like us”. Jenny’s words reflect a concern to include others in the life and perceived benefits of the community.

Like-minded is, therefore, not necessarily exclusive but an invitation to a new kind of community. Stanley Hauerwas (1981) understands the church at its best to be a community formed around the Gospel narratives, and as such its expression of community should demonstrate the lived reality of a new social order, recognising that the “plurality of that community reflects the richness of God’s creating and redeeming purposes” (p. 128). The value of community is appreciated when it is experienced, as Martyn Percy (2013, p. 62) notes, “it is only by immersing oneself in

a local church that one can begin to understand the complex range of implicit dynamics that make and shape a congregation". Therefore, "like-minded" reflects the need to be fully engaged in the community of the church to appreciate its value and purpose.

There is a danger that "like-minded" carries a negative tone, reflecting a community's desire to engage only with a particular kind of person. This suggests a "like-minded" church may only engage with certain ethnic or social groups, and therefore become exclusive. In the 1950s, Donald McGavran (1955, 1959) was part of the Church Growth movement which argues that churches grow best when conversion expects the fewest changes of a person. He clarifies this position in a later work stating "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (p. 163). McGavran's perspective was supported in the 1970s by Peter Wagner (1979), who argues that churches develop into healthy communities when they concentrate on one "kind" of person. This concept presents an unpleasant picture of a segregated church which only engages with 'our kind of people', presenting this as a valid missionary perspective. I find this position untenable because in my experience the process of becoming Christian and engaging with church requires the direct engagement of a church community in effective communication and contextualisation.[19] Newbigin (1989, p. 222) characterises the church as the "hermeneutic of the Gospel", he understands "like-minded" as encompassing those who are enabled to engage with the church, whose purpose is "to engraft new members into its life" (p. 227). In my research "like-minded" does create boundaries, but it is not understood by participants to function in creating exclusion. Rather it is presented as an invitation to engage with the church community and become 'one of us' by entering the lived experience of that church community. I characterise it in this way: 'you become one of us, by becoming one of us'.

The conversations from the group at Sonning Methodist reflect the importance of invitation. Jenny remembered her first time in the church, "everybody was ... really friendly and welcoming, and it is so important". Audrey, who had been part of the

[19] For further exploration of these issues see for instance: Donovan, 1978; Newbigin, 1986, 1989; Riddell, 1998.

church for forty years, agreed with this and it was clear that the most important thing a church could offer was “welcome”. Jenny takes this a stage further and suggests that invitation is itself, a way of being for the church: “I think we are all of a mind that … we want to let it be known we're here, and you know, ‘come in’”. The most striking conversation is found in reflections from Eltham Avenue Methodist. Gill comments:

> it frustrates me anyway, like at Christmas and Easter … they come here, you don’t see them from one year to the next ... [yet they say] “I’ve always been a member of Eltham” ... I remember somebody at coffee morning up there said “oh I’ve been a member here for I don’t know how many years” and I said “oh well I’ve never seen you! And I’ve been coming for eight year [sic]” … How can you be a member when you don’t go?

Gill admits to a struggle with people claiming to be part of the community when it feels like they do not have an effective engagement with it. Her desire is for them to engage fully with the church, become “like-minded” and share in the life of that community. Elaine from Sonning Methodist reflects on the purpose of her church, the experience of ‘strangers’ and the ‘correct’ response to them. She comments, “we're just accepting of them … you accept people as they are and nurture what you can”.

To become “like-minded”, a person is required to engage with the church, which requires they learn the habitus of that place. Within a community, the habitus Bourdieu describes imposes its

> logic on incorporation, and through [this] agents participate in the history objectified in institutions, [which] makes it possible to inhabit institutions,

> to appropriate them practically ... reviving the sense deposited in them (1990, p. 57).

It is, he claims, understanding and engaging with the habitus that allows an institution to be fully realised (1990, p. 57). "Like-minded" functions as an invitation to share the habitus of these church communities and, by doing so, to share in the continuing realisation of that community in the world.

The boundary expressed in the narrative of place reveals the nature of each church and offers an invitation to participate. The use of "like-minded" reflects the way each church holds an identity of its own, but this is offered to others through engagement within the habitus in that place.

5.3 Community and interpretation

As participants in my research express their identity, they describe a mode of interpretation, articulated as a 'way of knowing' and, a 'feel' for what is right within their community. In this section, I argue they operate as an interpretive community (Fish, 1976, 1980), which illuminates the 'feel' for community interpretation, and demonstrates the way the church protects their understanding of themselves and their broader context. Their experience of lived Methodism provides a way of interpreting their world and local context.

The concept of interpretative communities is suggested by Stanley Fish (1976) to conceptualise the ways groups interpret texts. Fish understands an interpretative community to be made up of those who share a pattern of writing texts, which carry the intentions and presumptions of that community. The 'rules' of interpretation exist before a text is read, shaping the interpretation rather than being shaped by the text itself (1980, p. 171). Following Fish's understanding, it is impossible to read any text without beginning the process of interpretation, and the interpretive strategies a reader exercises are governed by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs.

Fish claims that the only stability in the interpretation of a given text is that interpretative strategies are always used; meaning is revealed by strategies that "call forms into being" (1976, p. 485). He explains further: 'A reader other than myself who ... [puts] into execution a set of interpretive strategies similar to mine ... will perform the same (or at least a similar) succession of interpretive acts' (1980, p. 169).

Fish's understanding of interpretive communities can appear vague because he does not explain the way these communities are formed, how they develop, or who is a member of them, as Roberts (2006, p. 2) notes. Fish, however, resists the challenge to provide extensive definition, as he argues it rests in the practices of community:

> interpretative communities are no more than sets of institutional practices; and while those practices are continually being transformed by the very work that they do, the transformed practice identifies itself and tells its story in relation to the general purposes and goals that have survived and form the basis of that community (1989, p. 153).

The rules of interpretation are created through practice, as Fish claims, it is "the structure of the reader's experience" (1976, p. 468) which creates meaning in a text, this experience is governed by the community to which a person belongs. Fish suggests that readers do not interpret haphazardly, but in line with their interpretive community. In this work, I explore the way that the participants in the group interviews reveal their mode of interpretation as they construct narrative together. Here, I understand 'interpretation' as not merely limited to traditional textual interpretation, but as the way each church understands its identity through its narrative construction.

It is not clear how modes of interpretation are created in Stanley Fish's theory, without creating a top-down hierarchy of interpretation where the most vocal community drives interpretation by the strength of its positioning. Martha Roberts (2006) notes this, but accepts that a "certain set of interpretative principles" (2006,

p. 36) bind self-selecting communities together without rigidly controlling their experience. Following this, there can be a pluralism of interpretation within a set of principles, which is a necessary and valued facet of a post-structuralist literary approach, rather than creating a context of competitive interpretation. This position is shared by Lynne Pearce, who argues:

> an interpretative community does not represent a set of fixed, and shared, values with which the reader mindlessly agrees, or to whom s/he defers. Rather, it should be thought of as its own site of struggle: a group whose 'position' is constantly being renegotiated and re-legitimised by its constituent members (1997, p. 212).

If there is a pluralism of interpretation, then the boundary of an interpretative community can be understood as both being created by the community itself and by its positioning in relation to the influence of competing communities (Kálmán, 1997, pp. 70 - 73).

Roberts accepts that interpretative communities do exist in a variety of forms, the most pertinent here being a "situational interpretative community" (2006, p. 36): a group of people whose context requires they enact (and re-enact) certain interpretative strategies. I suggest there is potential to understand a church group as a situational interpretive community, guided through the lived experience of that community, not a series of predetermined strategies. In his theory of habitus, Bourdieu argues that a community's lived experience forms the 'rules of the game' by which it perceives itself and its societal context. Bourdieu calls the experience of living within those rules the *Doxa* (1990, pp. 67 - 68)*;* the relationship between the habitus and the field in which it operates, that generates the practical sense of how to live in the world. The practical sense, or 'feel for the game' continually interprets its context and sustains identity. This connection is noted by Norman Holland who comments "interpretation re-creates identity" (1980, p. 131). The community's

habitus creates a 'feel' for interpretation which allows it to assert its identity in context.

The churches in my research demonstrate a mode of interpretation, which is expressed through what feels right within their experience and the life of the community, rather than offering an explicit interpretation. They operate within an understanding of the unconscious practical logic of habitus, and of a community whose context drives their interpretative strategies. The Eltham Avenue Methodist group were comfortable talking about "like-believers" in their understanding of church, these conversations led them to explore the possible response to an interpretation which did not fit with the understanding of the church. Gill says:

> I get frustrated more ... if somebody that's saying something from the pulpit that I know is not right ... I've challenged a couple of people, because I've thought "I'm sorry", but you know, "that int [sic] what it says in my Bible".

In this fragment, Gill is talking about local preachers who are not part of her church community and whose perspectives do not seem to fit or feel right. Evelyn reflects on the way this same process can, in fact, be useful within a community by confirming 'wrong' interpretations:

> it strengthens you because you get different ideas and you think them over, and you think "well I don't agree with that" but you have to realise that somebody else has a different interpretation … it sort of strengthens either your beliefs, or it starts making you ponder about it. If it's what you've always read in the Bible and know in the Bible, well you're on good ground, you think "oh well what he or she said it's not right" and that's it.

Evelyn and Gill demonstrate their conviction that the community has the right and authority to define the boundaries of what is acceptable, and what is not, in its life. However, the presence of more challenging interpretations and the 'feel' it generates causes the community to test that perspective. Gill argues that interpretive communities provide a "feeling of objectivity" (1983, p. 56) to values which are held within it.

In 2007, James K A Smith, exploring the challenges of post-modernism to the church, recognises the limits of objectivity and the importance of interpretation. He writes,

> texts and language are not something we get through to a world without language or a state of nature where interpretation is not necessary … Rather interpretation is an inescapable part of being human and experiencing the world … everything must be interpreted in order to be experienced (2007, pp. 38 - 39).

As he reflects on the emergence of postmodern thought in 1991, David Bosch comments, "objectivity, as usually attributed to the 'exact' sciences has proved to be a delusion and, in fact, a false ideal" (1991, p. 359). When the notion of absolute truth is threatened, the stability provided by the feeling of objectivity within the interpretation of the community takes on a particular importance, as it becomes a place where the truth of the community can be protected and articulated. Fish (1980, p. 268) argues that within an interpretative community, meaning and truth can be considered absolute because the particular language used finds its place within that context, and, as such, its value is in the context in which it is created. This does not, however, enable objectivity beyond the community, but that is not its purpose. Gill argues, "many interpretive communities believe that their strategies produce truth, but the outside observer is more likely to find that those strategies, knowingly or not, serve the purpose of interpreting reality in ways that the communities believe are meaningful" (1983, p. 56). The community holds on to

those beliefs and practices that sustain its identity, in which they have invested meaning.

The interpretive communities revealed through the narratives in my research are not endlessly stable, as the people who constitute them change over time, so the community itself is changed. At the heart of Stanley Fish's understanding of interpretative communities is his assertion that "there are no fixed texts … only interpretative strategies making them" (1980, p. 172). These strategies are shared by those in the same interpretative community, whose proof of membership, Fish claims, is "the nod of recognition … [which says] 'we know'" (1980, p. 173). Individuals in Fish's schema interpret in a uniform way within their community, however, in my research the interpretative community is formed through the lived experience of its members. Elaine, from Sonning Methodist, explored the way in which the demographic of the church will always shape its understanding of the appropriate interpretation. She comments,

> whether we like it or not our congregation is getting older ... and not as able to physically do things that they were doing, you look in another two or three years' time, there's going to be a difference isn't there?

The shape of the community affects the feel for interpretation, but it must still be tested as members reflect on it. Richard explains, "a lot of small decisions happen almost by a sort of, unspoken consensus, don't they?" The 'feel' for interpretation can drive practice in unconscious ways, or in conscious, deliberate ways through conversations, small groups and Bible studies. Gill explores this further:

> [in] the Bible study, the vision group ... [I've] seen things slightly different to what I've thought in the past, and I think I have changed, quite a bit in that way ... but it's when people blatantly say something that I know is not right.

Gill recognises that the community may accept interpretations it did not anticipate, provided it fits with the 'feel' embed in its habitus. Those who are part of the life of a church may be members of additional communities which bring their experiences to bear on interpretation, but the shared experience of the church community and its 'rules' create similar yet "not identical" (Roberts, 2006, p. 36) interpretations. The feel for interpretation within an interpretative community provides unity, if not uniformity, within that community, because "ways of seeing have developed in response to the needs and goals of communities" (Gill, 1983, p. 56). When discussing how the church responds to preachers who they feel they cannot agree with, Mick notes that there are limits to acceptable interpretation, "you just stop, you switch off, you don't worship, do you? Full stop". In this situation, when an interpretation feels wrong the community disengages and does not allow it space or power in its understanding of place.

Ripley Methodist's reflections highlight the way a community can struggle to agree on its interpretation and members can support opposing positions. This shows how an interpretative community mediates between the individual and collective voice of place, developing its sense of purpose within the community. In the experience of the community at Ripley Methodist, the church can retrospectively agree to disputed interpretations, and while they were deeply divisive and controversial at the time, they can later be agreed to fit the vision, or 'feel' of the church and thus be 'correct'. Irene remembers that when their church building was redeveloped there was significant opposition: "the people who didn't want it to happen were more vocal… they were really shouting, 'how dare you do this?' I'm never going to come here again!'". At this point, the community's ability to form consensus and agree the correct interpretation was severely limited, but it could look back on these difficult moments with a new kind of vision and understanding. Irene remembers arguments over the colour of new chairs when the church was redeveloped. She comments

> I think as you get older you get different ... life experiences and, you know, to think do I want a blue chair or red chair, I'm not really bothered now, but then it was you know, "oh" you know, "I want red".

This anecdotal understanding of interpretation developing is seen in a more significant way as Barbara discusses how people responded when the church building was changed:

> having walls knocked down and having what you call church removed… and a structure put in that doesn't look like church, for them was almost [taking] the soul out and saying it can never be church again because you've taken away what we see as ... church.

Barbara later continues her story "over time all of them have changed their view and actually seen the benefits … it's actually … more fortuitous to them to have seen it happen". Russell Gill argues that interpretative communities

> rescue individuals from the radical isolation of subjectivism by giving them not only fellowship but, more basically, a common epistemology that allows them to understand experience in similar ways and thus to share a common sense of purpose (1983, p. 57).

Members of the community may perceive this sense of purpose at different times and may need to explore additional perspectives which ultimately reveal that purpose. Barbara, the Ripley Playhouse manager, sees this in the life of the church, "of those I know, all have changed - agreed that it was the best thing". While interpretation within a community is a complicated process, their feel for

interpretation, which creates meaningful practices and perspectives, remains the interpretative tool.

The church communities invite participation, and it is through that participation that a mode of interpretation operates. The church becomes a situational interpretative community which uses contextual strategies emerging from its lived experience, through its reflections on its place.

5.4 Community and Relationship

In each church, communities sustain their expression of identity and feed the habitus embodied in their practice through relationships between members of the congregation which provide stability for the community of the church. In this section, I outline the understanding of relationship in the three church communities. The narratives of the churches reflect a liminal experience, where *communitas* sustains relationships in the church which, in turn, feeds the interpretative 'feel' and invitation of the community.

Relationships are important in the narratives that the three church communities created, as they explored the community in its place. It is not the identity as a "Methodist church" which provides 'roots' for the members of the community, but the relationships themselves. The participants from Ripley Methodist explored the challenge of closing a church and the fragmentation that can result. Richard articulates this:

> if it's done badly, those people will not relocate to another Methodist church because they were so linked to that set of premises, that when those premises aren't there any more, it's as though their faith isn't there.

Here, Richard makes a connection between believing and belonging to a church or 'place'. Anna immediately challenges the view that this 'faith' was simply linked to the building, "it's about space and those people, isn't it?" Anna became part of the

Ripley Playhouse when it was converted from a traditional church and so didn't have any attachment to the building's previous traditional arrangement. For her, the faith expressed in the church community has developed through the relationships formed and sustained there; these provide stability to individuals within it. Richard continues, "it's quite difficult to start again somewhere else, unless you've got a natural group that you belong to". The relationships create a sense of 'rootedness' in the human experience of the church members. Simone Weil explores the way participation encourages belonging, communicating the value of the community. She comments,

> to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his [sic] real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future ... every human being needs to have multiple roots (1949, p. 43).

The participants in my research value the relationships they have formed with those who share 'their' church's life, these convey their sense of rootedness and belonging in place. Weil acknowledges that a person needs multiple roots, which may be in an institution, such as the church, or may be vested in relationships. The participants in my work connect their belief with their belonging to a church community, and the relationships in that context. It is not believing in the church, but in the relationships the church life allows. This reflects the understanding suggested by Abby Day (2011), who argues that belief is a social construct sustained by "performative belief rituals" (2011, p. 126). Day recognises a strong connection, arguing that "belief and belonging are interdependent, with beliefs being explicitly located, produced and practised in the public and the social realm" (2009, p. 276). For Day, belief is not simply propositional but is expressed in relationship. She seeks an understanding of

"belonging where we can locate people's beliefs not in propositions 'that' they believe, but the people 'in' whom they believe" (2009, p. 277). My research shares the concern that believing and belonging are connected, but for my participants the key issue was not for people *in* whom they believe, but rather people *with* whom they believe.

The experience of relationship in the church community helps the participants understand themselves and their expression of faith. Louis Zurcher (1977) notes the importance of relationship in forming identity; he sets out a series of modes in which an individual's sense of self is formed and nurtured. Zurcher's *social* mode is concerned with "statuses or roles … the self is involved in structured interpersonal relations" (1977, p. 176). The roles individuals take in society or a community group give them a method of speaking about themselves. The group interviews from each church drew together people who held different social roles in the church. In the first group interview, I asked participants to say what they felt their role, however they understood that word, was in the church. The responses from each church were similar, as the participants described formal roles and functions, Local Preacher, Senior Steward, Property Steward, choir member, Church Council Secretary, Superintendent Minister and so on. In fulfilling these roles, individual church members find themselves with people who they may not otherwise socialise with. Gill notes, "the thing about being a Christian is, you get a group of people going [who in] normal circumstances probably wouldn't relate to each other". For Evelyn, who had been a member at Eltham Avenue for most of her life, there was enormous value in the social roles that she took on in the life of the church. Her age and diminishing health had left her without these roles, and her identity in the church community had shifted.

> I'd always been doing something ... vestry steward and I was a Sunday school teacher when I was very young … when the war broke out ... [but now], I just feel surplus to requirement.

The relationships sustain the community's boundaries and protect the shared identity; this is shown when the group respond to Evelyn's words by affirming her place and value in the community. Sue reminds Evelyn that she used arrange the flowers for the church until it had closed, "I always noticed the flowers". This leads Evelyn to reply, "I had to ask ... Emily [another church member], to help me when I was bad with arthritis in my hip ... but before that, I used to do it all on my own, and I used to love it". The reaction to Evelyn's identity 'shifting' was to focus on the rootedness that exists in those relationships, in the affirmation from Sue and Evelyn's memories of help from Emily. The relationships exist because of the shared life and experience of the church, those who belong to the church create a social role as a 'member' of the church, which unites them. Avery Dulles names the peculiar experience of church communities as demonstrating 'mystical communion" (2002, p. 39), an almost inexpressible connection that exists among Christian groups, positioning the church as a 'distinctive' community. There is a danger that this understanding creates a closed community, where 'distinctive' becomes exclusive. Gill describes this experience with a more open resonance "it's like there is, there is that thin gold thread going through … a bond there that you wouldn't get in any other walk of life really". The relationships in the church community are not simply functional, but together they reveal the presence of God, the "thin gold thread" through the bond in community. For Evelyn, this bond allows her faith to be expressed in a way that it could not be "on your own".

The group from Sonning Methodist shared a concern for the bonds created in the local church. In the group conversations, relationships were an important element in bringing the members together in that church, and from that point the community's influence is vital. Rebecca explained, "outside your own immediate family ... that is the most important family to you". For the participants from Sonning, relationships drive their commitment to the church. Jenny articulated this for the group, "I've made a commitment to ... the fellowship". Jenny does not describe her commitment as being 'to the church', but that commitment is to 'fellowship'. She explains that her commitment is such that "both Brian and I know that that's where

God wants us to be". Jenny is committed to the experience of community in that place, not to church as an institution in that space.

These relationships can be understood through a consideration of *communitas*. The theory of communitas emerges from an understanding of the liminal space. The liminal space is understood to be a place of transition, for instance between being a teenager and an adult, when a person is in flux, neither as they were before separation, or as they will be after re-assimilation. Arnold Van Gennep (1960) argues that human rites of passage are concerned with liminal transitions. He suggests three distinct stages in these transitions: separation, segregation and incorporation. Separation from those things that are associated with a previous status is followed by segregation, where new truths, possibly about the previous role and the reason for separation, can and must be learnt before a person can be incorporated into a new status within life. These three stages may also be referred as pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal (1960, p. 21). I contend that the experience of a church community reflects a liminal experience. In creating a community with a particular ethos ('under God') within its place, there is separation from the physical context as the church exists with an understanding that there is some measure of eschatological fulfilment for which it 'waits'. The present is experienced through this separation and anticipated 'completion', and as such becomes a liminal place. In an attempt to explain the experience of people in the liminal space, Victor Turner (1969) relates a theory of communitas. Communitas may be understood as 'relationships of immediate, direct, heart to heart experiences' (Davies, 2002, p. 125). The liminal space can, therefore, become an experience and space, in which a shared rootedness exists. Communitas is a distinctive feature of the liminal period for Turner (1969) which he develops into three models. *Existential-spontaneous communitas* exists between people who feel bonded together in a way that would be impossible in 'normal life'. *Normative communitas* emerges when control is needed for the community to achieve its goals. *Ideological communitas* is seen in utopian groups striving to develop a particular way of life together. The church communities demonstrate Turner's existential-spontaneous communitas, a local construct and lived experience at the heart of the church which creates a kind of community only

known by members of the church. In the conversation at Ripley Methodist, Richard returns to his understanding of "like-minded" to express the complex relationships in that understanding of community:

> it's the core of belief that makes us like-minded that holds us together isn't it? It's not ... what actually you believe about the virgin birth, but you know ... we believe that faith is … personal ... and to be shared, its more than that, but that is enough for us to go ahead together.

Richard believes in the shared experience of faith in the local, lived, community experience. Eltham Avenue considered the relationships within the church as essential to their shared life. Without the support of the community, Gill argues, faith

> gets watered down and you lose it … [When] you're meeting other people if you're going a bit off the ball … discussion with one another can sort of put you right and kind of support you.

Relationships in the church enable members to understand how to live in that community effectively. The nature of the lived experience of these churches creates a space where relationships of *communitas* are formed. These relationships sustain the rootedness of the church and feed the habitus expressed in that place.

5.5 Summary

The narrative of place in this research places a significant focus on community. Through their habitus, the community forms their understanding of self and the identity they project. This habitus is formed firstly through attention to the boundaries of the community; a desire to reframe "like-minded" by extending an invitation for people to participate in the life of the community. Secondly, participation continues to form the habitus which enables that group to function as

an interpretative community, sharing a 'feel' for interpretation in their community context. Thirdly, the habitus is formed and sustained through the relationships in the church, rooting the sense of community in the local experience. The narrative of place draws on the lived experience in the place of the local church in the world. Through the habitus, the church communities form their sense of identity, which is resourced locally by the contribution of its members, and as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, their use of memory and developing understanding of tradition. The narrative of place reveals the nature of lived Methodism through listening to the local experience and examining how identity is articulated there, rather than beginning with Methodist theology or practice.

CHAPTER SIX

PLACE AND MEMORY

Through their embodied habitus, the narrative of place reveals the self-understanding of the churches I have studied. The experience of place enables participants to reflect on their understanding of community, as outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter will consider how memory functions within these narratives. In the group interviews, stories of the past were frequently told. Simone Weil understands community as the place where "treasures of the past" and "expectations for the future" (1949, p. 43) are held. This current chapter examines how these treasures are recorded and expectations projected. This is done through an appeal to memory. There are two ways in which memory is used by the churches in my research. First, to validate the community, demonstrating it has grown and changed, having a shared history that gives it credibility in the eyes of its members. Secondly, memory functions to articulate shared values, for instance, the sense of 'welcome', or an 'outward focus', revealing the members' understanding of their church in its local community.

I extend Danièle Hervieu-Léger's claim that religion exists as a "chain of memory" (2000). While she suggests that religion is transmitted from one generation to another through their collective memory, I argue that memory does not only transmit an understanding of religious practices and perspectives, but it provides an insight into the three communities' articulation of 'who we are in this place' and further illuminates the experience of lived Methodism.

6.1 The Importance of Memory in Community.

Memory is an important part of the human experience, as Emile Durkheim reflects,

> In each one of us … is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past personae predominate in us … It is just that we don't directly feel the influence of

> these past selves precisely because they are so deeply rooted within us. They constitute the unconscious part of ourselves (1977, p. 11).

Memories have power to affect understanding of the present and perception of the future. Julia Shaw, writing regarding fundamental principles of memory, notes that it "shape[s] what we think we have experienced and ... what we think we are capable of in the future" (2016, p. xi). Memory enables identities to be constructed in the context of the whole life of an individual or community, the perception of history, and the claiming and re-claiming of that history. The stories that individuals or communities use to structure their narratives of identity are communicated through memory, which enables the writing of connecting narratives. These inform the narrative of place, because they are crucial in articulating a developing sense of identity. The theory of habitus is described by Pierre Bourdieu as 'embodied' history; it is "internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history" (1990, p. 56), within it is the entire history of an individual or a community. This history may not be actively recollected in full, but the influence of fragments may remain in the enacted history. The performance of the community in the world is always held in relation to its history, known through the habitus. This is "objectified" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 57) in the institutions it creates, where the concrete influence of the habitus is seen in its enactment. The memories that members of a community hold, therefore, are reflections of a much larger history, which situates the community in its context.

The relationship between history and memory is nuanced by Maurice Halbwachs (1950), who argues that memory does not simply recall events, but bridges the 'gap' between past and present and restores the "ruptured continuity" (1950, p. 140) in community. Therefore, memory allows a more holistic picture of that community to be realised. In my research, the churches experience a ruptured history, as individuals come and go over the years; their history is not held by one person, and it extends beyond the lifetime of any individual. The history of a church provides some continuity, but it is not objective recollection; it is collective memory. Halbwachs argues that collective memory differs from history in two key ways. Firstly, collective memory is

> a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping memory alive … it does not exceed the boundary of the group (1950, p. 140).

Secondly, there are several collective memories; while these can refer to the same official history, the memory may be constructed differently by groups in their own context. Halbwachs writes, "in contrast to the historian, these groups are far from affording equal significance to events, places, and periods that have not affected them equally" (1950, p. 143). The memories that are significant in community are those that 'do' something, Jan Assmann refers to these memories formed in the interaction and dialogue within communities as "communicative memories" (2006, p. 3). As the members of the group interviews speak about their churches, they are not only 'telling stories', they are using memory to communicate with one another, and with me as the researcher. As they interact, they shape memories to reflect their interpretation of the community's history.

Memories held by particular members of the community can become memories *of* the community when they articulate something of value. Pierre Nora (1989) argues that memory is not spontaneous, but is created and expressed as part of a larger narrative. Important anniversaries and events have to be remembered for specific reasons, which are connected to relationships, or the life of a community. The purpose of memory in community is not to present an ordered historical account of that community, but to articulate that community. John Frow (1997, p. 154) comments that "like a well-censored dream ... memory has the orderliness and the teleological drive of narrative. Its relation to the past is not that of truth but of desire". When a community remembers, it is doing more than revealing its life with all its characteristics, rather, as Jan Assmann notes, remembering "introduce[s] an order and a structure into that internal life that are socially conditioned and that link us to the social world. Every act of consciousness is socially mediated" (2006, p. 2).

Memories are shaped by the context in which they are created and articulated because they do something within that 'world'.

While it is individuals who remember, those memories allow people to find a place in the world and make sense of their experience, because those memories are constructed in and through relationship. As Tuula Sakaranaho (2011) notes, "memory is intersubjectively constituted" (2011, p. 139); the past therefore is "the decisive resource for the consciousness of ... identity. Anyone who wants to belong to the group must share the memory" (Assmann, 2006, p. 87). A community creates memories that are important to understand its shared life and priorities. The valuing of memory does not require all members of the group or community to remember, rather they negotiate memories that are formative and retain them; they are then free to dismiss other recollected events.

The church communities in my research have histories that stretch to the nineteenth century; their memories of this history mean their church is 'shaped' differently. Maurice Halbwachs reflects on the way memory was used in the early church community. As communities grew in the years and decades after Christ's resurrection, they were separated spatially and socially any differences in practice and thought did not concern them. Halbwachs notes, "these communities were neither astonished, anxious, nor scandalised that the beliefs of one community differed from those of another" (1992, p. 94). The communities were actualised differently because in each place the experience of faith recalled and constructed as memory held different emphases and directives. The lived experience of those communities used memory in context, as Sakaranaho (2011, p. 151) notes, religious traditions are constituted by selective recollection, and memory formation. These traditions relate to the place of their experience, memories are subject to interpretation, in turn supporting and sustaining the coherence of the community's identity. Grace Davie uses "vicarious memory" (2000, p. 177) to describe the process where a small number of people hold the memory of a religious tradition or community and are able to "articulate its basic tenants" (2000, p. 177) on behalf of others. The religious tradition is sustained as long as those memories are preserved. The memories that uphold a community can also be held vicariously and drawn upon

to explain that community's life when the need arises. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argues that these communities prevent certain memories being developed and shared to defend the community's life and practice. He comments that the community "does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts, and traditions left behind by that past" (1992, p. 93). This reflects Davie's (2000) claim that memory is always precarious, because it is often held by a small group of people, it is dependent on that group to preserve it, and can easily be lost or not be sustained indefinitely. The precarious nature of memory is negated somewhat by the way memory develops over time and allows new forms of practice and understanding to emerge.

Within Bourdieu's theory of habitus, memories are retold and recast in community over time allowing new insights into its life. The habitus

> is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history ... to succeed in reproducing themselves ... in the form of durable dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 85).

When the recasting of memory forms new practices, these are held within the 'rules of the game' established through the habitus and embodied in community. In a community, memory is essential in creating a sense of belonging, linking history to present experience, fulfilling the need to "belong and be part of something larger" (Sakaranaho, 2011, p. 153). The experience of sharing memory allows a community to "restructure its past togetherness" (Assmann, 2006, p. 94).

This understanding of memory as a vehicle for self-understanding and articulation demonstrates the usefulness of memory in community. Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) suggests that religion itself should be understood as a 'chain of memory'. Through the crisis of modernity, she argues, the great danger to the church is that the chain of memory is broken by a new appeal to individualism and subjectivity. In this context, religion transmits an unbroken continuity from its beginning to the

present time. Hervieu-Léger uses three characteristics to describe religion (2000, p. 97). The first is belief expressed in the narratives of a particular religion or community, which may be written, spoken or 'performed'. The second characteristic is the memory of continuity in the life of a community, where the past experiences justify the "rational projection of the future … [the community is] validated by its own continuity" (p. 99). The final characteristic is tradition, which is the "legitimising reference to an authorised version of such memory, that is to say, a tradition" (p. 97). Here, the authorised religious tradition controls the construction of effective memory within a religious group, creating limits of what is acceptable and what is not. Local religious communities experience a habitus that is rooted in their experience of place, and, therefore, the influence of a broader 'official' religious tradition is interpreted through that habitus. The legitimising memories of a religious community are not the 'official memories' of the religious tradition, but the memories formed in the local, lived experience. Memory does not simply transmit an understanding of religious practices and perspectives, or an official affiliation, it provides coherence, linking past and present, affording an insight into the 'inner core' of the lived experience of the community, where the heart of the church's identity is held (Dulles, 2002, p. 41). These memories are held in keeping with the 'feel of the game', provided by the community's habitus.

In this research, memory functions in two ways. Firstly, participants from each congregation use memory to show how their shared history and continuity validate their experience of church. Secondly, memory is used to describe shared values of 'welcome' and 'outward focus' in the life of the church. Memory aids participants in the construction of identity-disclosing narratives and provides an insight into the lived Methodism in these church communities.

6.2 Memory and Validation

As the members of the group interviews talked, memories were shared and considered, and there was laughter as people and events in the lives of the churches were recalled. At Sonning Methodist, Rebecca remembers "once having this meeting and we wanted to use candles in ... and Mr James [the Steward] went absolutely ballistic ... that we weren't having candles in our church". Jenny responds

to this with another memory, “we must have had two years discussing at every church meeting whether we should have a new carpet in church and what colour it should be ... does it matter?” As both of these memories were shared, the participants laughed and enjoyed the telling. At Ripley Methodist, Irene remembered when the church was considering its future, “we did a survey of all the people in Ripley Village … me and Barbara were allotted to go and see this lady, and boy did she have some … views!” This laughter is both in joy as happy memories are shared and at the nature of some experiences the congregation had lived through. These stories were accepted as part of the community’s history. They are ‘vicarious’ because they are maintained for the benefit of the whole group and the wider church community. However, they are not simply held within the community, they are used by the members to develop an understanding of ‘their’ church. Julia Shaw, a psychologist writing on the function and limits of memory (2016, p. xi) argues “the root of your ‘you-ness’ ... lies in your personal memories”; likewise, the root of the ‘us-ness’ of a community lies in the memories they use within their narratives of identity. The memories used in my research present a validation to the church, they say ‘we are doing a good job’; ‘we continue to grow and develop as a church’; ‘this is a good place to be’. The memories shared in the groups are not all comfortable, but the way they are used provides a positive image of the community.

For over a hundred years, Ripley Methodist was a traditional Methodist (originally Wesleyan) church. In 2007, it underwent significant development, which changed the building, allowing it to operate as a Fresh Expression of Church. These changes meant many of the symbols of that traditional church, for instance the organ and the pews, were removed. In the conversations, Playhouse manager, Barbara, suggested that those changes have become part of the shared history of the church and were accepted. Richard, the Superintendent Minister, questioned whether this was the case in the second meeting and asked if everyone was genuinely happy, “do you think it’s true … that everyone who objected to the playhouse has now come round?” He is satisfied by Barbara’s response, “those that I know of, yes”. This could be interpreted as those who I remember or choose to remember. The outcome, however, was that the group accepted the memory which validates the current

expression of church in that place. John Swinton (2012) reflects on the importance of memory within a church when, through dementia, an individual member is unable to share certain memories. He comments

> it is as the church as a living body of remembering friends learn what it means to hold on to and practice the right memories that healing, hope, and active remembrance become a practical possibility (p. 222).

The community must learn to "remember well" (p. 222) in order to preserve those things which are life-giving to its members. Ripley's use of memory allows the community to remember stories of those who disagreed in a way that affirms the decisions taken. These memories bridge "the gap between past and the present" (Halbwachs, 1950, p. 140), affirming that the correct decision was made. Memory restores the ruptured continuity of the church's history that was damaged by the recollection of those who did not agree with the changes to the building.

In his explorations of human memory theories, Alan Baddeley (1997, p. 9) notes that an individual's memory is acquired through their senses, and interpreted through emotion and context. The individuals in a church community form their memories in this way. However, when the context of the remembering becomes the community life, the individuals negotiate their memories in reference to things they hold in common. Rebecca, the Senior Church Steward from Sonning Methodist, considers the growth and development of the church:

> we have come a long way … we remember one person, didn't [sic] we - when, Sandra first started coming, and she used to raise arms, and he said – 'we' his words were – 'we don't do that in our church'.

Rebecca uses the words “we remember” as the memory is not hers alone, it is a collective memory, which shows how the church’s life has developed. Elaine questions this memory incredulously, as she had joined the church since the time Rebecca was speaking of, “who said that?” to which Rebecca responds, “don’t [sic] matter who said that ... I remember thinking ... [what] a thing to say to somebody ... we've moved a long [way]… we're getting better aren’t we?” Rebecca’s use of “we” moves the memory from one of a group of people restricting action in the church, to a group who use this memory to say ‘we are not like that now’. The church feels they are ‘better’ than they were in the past, as new practices are formed within its habitus, the lived experience of the church has developed, ‘remembering well’, therefore, validates the present church experience.

Eltham Avenue Methodist Church closed in 2012. In conversations, the participants’ memories of the ‘harmony’ of that church congregation were used to offer validation to ‘their’ church, its life, and closure. Sue, who had been part of the church for five years, pondered whether the church had ever disagreed, “in all the time we were there, during that time, there we no disagreements, everybody was in harmony with one another”. This leads Evelyn to describe how the church operated in the past:

> when it was a private ... trust ... if we decided that we wanted some new cups and saucers … we used to have things to raise the money to pay for it, but we had to give the money to the trust and we had to ask them if we could have these cups and saucers!

Evelyn uses the experience of ‘her’ church being governed by a small group of wealthy people, “these trustees, the two families”, to demonstrate the value of the current expression of her church. In Evelyn’s understanding, the congregation may have voted to close the church, but in making that decision, they were acting in the right way. The power of those who voted to close the church was not simply granted because they were wealthy. Evelyn’s memory showed the way the church had operated historically but was shared to offer a comparison with the present church

experience, claiming that 'we have done things correctly'. Gill offers further memories of closing the church:

> I think most people in their hearts probably knew it was the right decision ... I mean I did really feel ... for a lot of the older people ... it were [sic] quite difficult for them you know.

Gill recognises that closing the church was not easy for all the members but claims the community "knew in its heart" that it was right. This memory affirms Evelyn's understanding that the church acted properly and becomes accepted as part of the church's history. This kind of episodic memory[20] demonstrates the explicitly "subjective experience of the person doing the remembering" (Schacter, 1996, p. 17). They are created with subjective meaning, which can, however, be quickly modified because of the "creative and emotional dimension" (Swinton, 2012, p. 209) of memory and the context in which it is remembered. The personal memories of the Eltham Avenue group are given a new meaning in the context of the church, used to validate that life, and demonstrate that even after its closure it was a 'good church'.

In the conversations at Ripley Methodist Church, memory demonstrates that their church was a 'true' Christian church, this was shown through memories of people who had been part of it and was shared to validate the 'Christian' quality of the whole community. Irene explained,

> Jean and Roy used to run the cubs, the scouts, used to have youth group[s] ... [and] when it were [sic] Roy's funeral… so many ex scouts and cubs came to his funeral, Jean said 'I wish he could have known

[20] Schacter 1996, p17 outlines three modes of memory: semantic memory, which relates to conceptual and factual knowledge. Procedural memory, which is conceded with learning skills and habits. Episodic memory, which allows specific incidents to be recalled and assessed.

> just what people thought of him' …The Christian part of them both came through.

The memories of each community pay significant attention to individual people from the churches' histories, as Irene does with Roy. Her memory demonstrates that Ripley Methodist was a Christian community, with exemplary Christians at the heart of its life. These memories are nostalgic yet hold meaning-making power in the community. Clay Routledge, Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Jacob Juhl and Jamie Arndt (2012) point out that nostalgia has three psychological functions: it generates positive affect; enhances self-esteem and "serves as a repository for social connectedness" (2012, p. 453). The memories in the group interviews demonstrate these functions in the life of the community, and, when taken as a whole, offer validation to their expression of church. The stories of individual people are told to further this, as Sakaranaho (2011, p. 144) notes, they "encapsulate conceptions of character: of what a good person is like, and of virtues that define such character". In the memory of Ripley Methodist, the exemplary personalities of Jean and Roy are not only good people but understood as 'Christian people' who encapsulate the Christianity of their church. In the conversations with Sonning Methodist church, memories of particular people feature in a slightly different way. The conversation focusses on the way the church operated in the past, with people who were thought of as 'strong characters' and perceived to be 'in charge'. Brenda, who had been a member of the church for more than fifty years, spoke of when she was involved with the youth group,

> The vestry in the old church was absolutely terrible … and we had the youth group on a Sunday evening and we asked if we could decorate it, and that was a breakthrough ... that the trustees said we could do it on a Sunday evening, and that was a big [change].

This memory is interpreted further by Rebecca, who continues the memory of 'strong characters', and tries to explain why Brenda's experience was of such note. Rebecca comments,

> going back when it were [sic] like Laurence, and you know, Andrew and all them, I mean, I wouldn't have dared say, I don't think even suggest anything, because well you just didn't, did you? ... you were just in awe of them [weren't] you?

This conversation seems at first to be negative; however, it is put into a new perspective by the group. Elaine, who as a relative newcomer to the church had therefore never known Laurence or Andrew, comments "it was just a different way of life". In adding this thought, Elaine accepts the memory as having a value which should be retained, rather than being discarded as unacceptable in the current expression of 'her' church. Rebecca continues the explanation of this memory,

> my dad were [sic] just the same … the old stalwart Methodist people ... believed in discipline and all that kind of thing, you know the older generation really ... but they were steeped in Christian belief. Poor Andrew and ... Mr James, we're giving them some stick today aren't we? But we don't mean it that way ... I mean we were really fond of them weren't [we?]

In this fragment, Rebecca agrees with Elaine that the people she has mentioned were from a different time but the memory of these people and the challenges they brought were valuable to the church. The real function of this memory is to show the development of the church, revealed when Rebecca, referring to the incident concerning candles mentioned earlier, takes it a stage further:

> do you remember when those candles came out for Baptisms, you know ... and Laurence went absolutely ballistic ... he were [sic] absolutely beside himself, and there was no way would we have dared to light a candle after that ... That's where we've come a long way in lots of ways, don't you think in our Methodist church?

Rebecca shows that the people she mentions were valuable in the community, but they were a representation of a different time. Their memory shows that the community has grown because the individuals that are mentioned are not remembered as damaging the church, rather they fulfilled their roles in their time. They are valued for those roles and are held in the memory of the church as 'leaders' and 'stalwarts'. These memories of past practices, which seem to jar with the present experience, enable the church to recognise that their history connects them to something 'larger than themselves': their belonging was rooted in that larger context (Sakaranaho, 2011, p. 153). This context of church history, with exemplary individuals, provides meaning and validates the present experience. Clay Routledge et al (2012, p. 457) argue that "nostalgia functions to provide a sense of life meaning", in my work that 'meaning' communicates the validity of the local church experience.

These memories, shared and claimed by participants from the three congregations, demonstrate how memory becomes a vehicle to understand the current life of the church, providing a contextual validity for its current experience. In the narratives of these three churches, memory does not, as Hervieu-Léger argues, simply transmit religion; it is constructed by a community, it is rooted in 'our experience', and the memory of 'us', which enlightens the present: locating a community within its own sense of place.

6.3 Memory and Values

‘Remembering well’ restores the community ruptured by disagreement and the natural changes of people by demonstrating the validity of the church. It claims, ‘this is a good church’, and articulates the shared values of the three communities. Memory reveals significant characteristics in the lived experience of the church, providing continuity across their history. Tilmann Habermas and Christin Köber argue “for a coherent sense of self or identity, both a synchronic integration of present elements across different situations and a diachronic integration over time, self-continuity, are essential” (2015, p. 664). Memory provides the mechanism by which the sense of “self is the sameness of the remembered self over time” (Habermas and Köber, 2015, p. 665). The participants in my research create a ‘sameness’ of identity by remembering the values that have sustained their church through its shared history.

Some of the crucial memories, expressing values, at Sonning Methodist were concerned with the experience of joining the church. When Jenny speaks about what originally brought her to Sonning, she remembers choosing her church because of a sense of being comfortable in that “fellowship”. This causes Rebecca to test whether Jenny still feels this way in the church, she asks, “are you happy that you made that move then? Do you think it was right?” Jenny replies, “oh I’ve no doubts whatsoever Rebecca ... I know that that's where God wants us to be”. Having begun to establish a value of welcome in the life of the church, Rebecca shares a memory,

> when I went to St. Arnold’s ... I just didn't feel I fit in there … but when I came here ... Hilda spoke to me first, only like she would, you know, but it just felt totally different … from the first time I went it was very different, and very welcoming, friendly, you know, and I think that’s probably one of our strengths.

Rebecca, asks the group to accept the memory, referencing Hilda, a deceased member of the church, creating a group memory “like she would – you know”. This memory allows Rebecca to claim that the quality Jenny highlights in the church is not

'new', but both a present and historical value of the church, linking the synchronic and diachronic continuity of the church in the articulation of 'welcome'. This perspective is shared by other members of the group, Simon comments,

> I used to go to church ... [on] special occasions ... then … Edward Walker ... said 'would you come and help' and from that day on ... [I've been part of the church].

Audrey also shares her memory of joining the church,

> I just, probably 1963, I came up here, and … I'm still here! ... Well Roger and Pauline always came, and Roger helped upstairs when we had the ... the youth group up there and ... so, I've always felt at home here ... It means an awful lot to me.

Audrey and Elaine agree that their church is special because of "the welcome" says Elaine, "oh yes [and] ... the fellowship ... oh it's wonderful" replies Audrey. Habermas and Köber (2015, pp. 666 - 667) comment "an individual may both judge the self to have changed and to be still basically the identical person". The community's negotiated memories show, despite the physical and material changes of age and time, the church is the same in its values.

Memories are subjective and can operate in different ways, and the past can be 'remembered' and 'known'. Certain events are remembered with a strong awareness of the facts (Schacter, 1996, p. 23); while knowing is "the strong conviction that we know or should remember something" (Schacter, 1996, p. 25) without access to the range of detailed information available in remembering. Shaw (2016, p. 243) suggests that "we may have an intuitive understanding of the things we remember and the things that we do not" (p. 243). This intuition is formed in the lived experience of a

community, shaped by the habitus, which enables members to learn how to "act and respond in the course of their daily lives" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 13) within that community. 'Knowing' is in line with the creation of a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), created through the habitus. When the group from Eltham Avenue speak about 'welcome', their conversation leads on to the need for belonging in the church; the feeling of belonging is expressed as a 'known' value. Gill considered how the church had changed while she had been part of it and remarked that despite any material changes,

> the feeling amongst the people was the same it was, you know, it was quite a warm church really ... even when it was bigger and ... and when I was young you know, it was always.

Evelyn speaks knowingly about the 'warmth' of the church, "it was always, and it still is and that is why I am part of it", additional memories are then used to support this. Sue thought that in their church "everybody supported one another, and I think that's ... you get that within a small [church]". Mick clarified the nature of that 'smallness', referring to it as "a close-knit community". Evelyn accepts these comments and links them to a judgement on the nature of a small church. She comments,

> it's easier, I won't say it's better - in a small community to look after each other … like I used to go to Marlborough Hall and there used to be two thousand went at Sunday night. Well, I mean, you were just another one.

Evelyn's memory of going to a large church allows her to understand what she knows about 'her' small church and to claim the values of welcome and belonging as a crucial part of Eltham Avenue. It is never openly said that a sense of welcome is not possible in a large church, but the experience of the small church assures its members that their community embodied a 'real' welcome. The memories of the church are

used in such a way that this belief is affirmed and expressed as a shared value, knowing and remembering the past allows what Assmann calls the reconstructing of "past togetherness" (2006, p. 94). This creates an understanding of a "normative past" (Assmann, 2006, p. 94), where the welcome of the church creates the expectation of belonging, this is then valued as a characteristic of the church life which should be preserved.

The episodic memories in the three groups I have studied demonstrate what Nabil Bouizegarene and Frederick Philippe (2016) call autobiographical reasoning, which involves "forming links between events of one's life in an attempt to relate one's personal past and present, and to understand them in a coherent way" (2016, p. 617). These memories, they argue, shape the way an individual captures their identity. The process of forming links between memories is a narrative process, which considers the order and purpose of each individual memory as part of the whole picture to be communicated. Memories are often linked to particular contexts, therefore Bouizegarene and Philippe comment,

> we should expect the relation between self-defining memories and identity to be mostly domain-specific (e.g., university, work, friendship, etc.) and therefore that people could use specific identity processing styles in certain domains and not in others (2016, p. 619).

The church context I have researched creates a way of understanding identity, the habitus, in which memories are used to enable identity processing and communicated in shared narrative. In their study of autobiographical memory retrieval, Elise Debeer, Filip Raes, Mark Williams, Miet Craeynest and Dirk Hermans (2014) question whether memory recall can be brought under control, concluding that "autobiographical memory retrieval can be shaped by an operant learning process" (2014, p. 180). The habitus shapes remembering and 'knowing' in a context as a learning process, the memories that emerge are the result of this.

In Ripley Methodist church, a key shared value was the 'outward focus', expressed in engagement with the local community. The current expression of the Ripley Playhouse was developed with this in mind, that context now shapes the memories used to convey the corporate sense of identity. In the years before the church had been changed to suit its new function, Irene remembers asking local residents for their opinions. She notes, "me and Barbara were allotted to go and see this lady… [she said] we didn't do enough for the ... community". Irene then takes this memory further to show that the process of visiting people was part of the church's outward focus. She observes, "we'd offered a free hamper, hadn't we, to ... get them to fill this form in, and they'd won it, [so] we went with it!" These memories show the church's desire to engage with local people, but also reveal the feeling that this was not appreciated. This leads Barbara to share memories of the way the church had engaged with the community in the past. She speaks of the church rooms being used as a school and a bomb shelter in the Second World War, allowing her to claim that playhouse was continuing the historical work of the church and fulfilling its 'mission'. She says,

> if you talk to our members ... they will say now 'that's the reason we stayed open' and, and I think that it was a real blessing when they actually saw it fulfilled and people were back in the building.

This memory shows how the context of the playhouse shapes the values highlighted by its members, as the 'outward focus' had allowed them to fulfil their 'dream'. Irene compares a memory of the traditional church to the current expression, which shows how the 'outward focus' had changed the church for the better,

> it's lovely to see [now] ... I mean all the children's happy faces…I mean I remember bringing my son ... he would be about 18 months, and he used to go in the back pew, which used to lock, I used to bring his slippers, and

> a book, and we used to sit there at the back ... you know, used to get all these tuts and people looking at you, well, I mean seeing children now, are coming and enjoying it, and I'm sure that they take it in more than, you know, than what used to happen.

Irene notes that the 'outward focus' of the new 'new' church was also seen in the way it engaged with 'unexpected' people, "[there was] that guy, and he came to visit ... didn't he, seen it on the Internet". Barbara then places other memories into the group, claiming them as memories the church can own,

> we had a couple of offenders who worked after they had finished their time, because they wanted to complete their work, and one of them was a shop fitter who did all the toilets … he came back here for three months afterwards to complete his work, as he said this is just wonderful, and I want to see it finished … We had one who was here for 18 months ... I mean he's turned his life around ... people didn't look down at him, they just accepted him, and wanted the best for him ... And I think they're the stories that say what faith is … [not] saying 'this is a church'.

These memories present an understanding of Ripley Methodist church's 'outward focus' as a mark of 'faith' and 'church'. What the group members believe 'church' to be is illuminated by the actions of their church, they claim that one of their core values is its 'outward focus' and the desire to engage with local people. In practising this value, they understand themselves to be participating in the life of the whole church, mediated through their experience. The use of memory here allows the community to claim this value as part of their shared history, informing the present life of their church. Susan Bluck outlines three areas in which autobiographical memories, such as those shared in the group interviews, function. Firstly, they enable people to use their experience of the past to make plans for their future.

Secondly, they facilitate social interaction by creating understanding of other people and their history, and finally, they preserve the continuity of the self (2003, pp. 114 - 115). The memories of Ripley Methodist fulfil these functions through the expression of the values of the community, which root the members in their understanding of place, and their purpose within it.

6.4 Summary

The narrative of place is resourced through the lived experience of community and, within this, memory is used to articulate the local expression of community in its place. Memory has a profound influence on identity, locating individuals in community and communities in their broader societal context. In her study of religion, Hervieu-Léger argues that memory functions as a chain which transmits the religious identity of a religious community. However, in my research, memory functions firstly in offering validation to the local church's experience, an appeal to memory showing growth and development or communicating that 'this is a good church'. Secondly, memory functions to articulate the shared values in the life of the church, demonstrating how those values are apprehended in the life and history of the church, and appropriating those values in its present expression. Memory therefore illuminates the experience of the local church, resourcing the construction of shared identity narratives which show how the lived Methodism of a community is enacted in both their history and present life. The narrative of place is firmly rooted in context, it is created out of a habitus which guides the local understanding of community and is located by an appeal to memory.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PLACE AND TRADITION

The narrative of place reveals the lived experience of the three congregations where an embodied habitus is constructed. This local phenomenon conveys the boundaries of the community and guides their mode of interpretation. The community is affirmed and validated by the construction of collective memories. Within this lived experience, each church claims to share a 'Methodism' which is expressed differently in each case; the 'Methodism' these churches express forms part of the narrative of place, articulating their identity as a church within the Methodist tradition. Their reflections are held in relation to the churches' understanding of community and memory as identity-forming influences.

In this research, the interaction of a variety of people with differing roles form the community of the church, acknowledging the influence of 'official' Methodism, yet also interpreting Methodism locally. The Methodist tradition that exists locally is not complete or a 'finished product'; as it develops, it reveals differences in the 'shape' and practice of those churches which claim a place within it. For the expression of Methodist tradition in the local church to be meaningful and useful in the life of a church community, it must be appropriated in that context; it cannot simply be the replication of a uniform tradition which is enacted in each local church. In the group interviews, participants discuss tradition in three connected modes; this chapter will consider each of these modes in turn. First, the local tradition, an intrinsic understanding which values the experience of the local as forming church tradition. This local tradition is balanced by the received tradition, an extrinsic mode where those who locate themselves in Methodist narratives beyond the local church function as representatives of official Methodism, bringing that tradition into the local church experience. These representatives act as 'guardians' of the official tradition. The local and received traditions form a third mode, a contextual Methodist tradition; a 'quest' mode, where the community appropriates a contextual Methodist tradition, drawing on local and received perspectives.

7.1 Continuing '*a Work in Progress'.*

In Chapter Two, I drew on Angelia Shier-Jones' (2005) understanding of Methodism as a 'work in progress', to suggest that Methodism is not static, but continually developing. She argues "it is the Methodist people who write, develop, preach, and proclaim Methodist theology … that shape and define contemporary Methodist theology" (2005, p. 4). This points towards a Methodism shaped and developed through experience, because it suggests that Methodism is realised at a local level. However, the model Shier-Jones suggests takes a different view. Methodist theology, she claims, is found in Methodist hymnody, training materials, statements and reports, the work of various Methodist charities and organisations, and Methodist liturgical forms (2005, p. 5). The Methodist theology that is vested in these places is formed by the work of Methodist people, and the Methodism that emerges from this process of theological reflection is a contextual development as each generation engages with Methodist history and practice. It remains, however, a work which is limited to producing an authorised or official Methodist theology promoting an official Methodism.

As local churches live within the Methodist tradition, claiming a Methodist 'title' and acknowledging that an aspect of their identity is held in a Methodism that exists in their church, the Methodism which they exhibit is generated from their context. Luke Curran (2009) suggests that the nature of Methodism changed significantly as it developed, grew, and formally became a church. He argues that Methodism is continually moving away from a movement expressed in a personal faith, towards a narrow theological ideal,

> slowly the emphasis on sharing individual faith and its theological emphasis on grace and personal holiness waned, and so it has lost two of its primary points of distinctiveness through which it could have engaged in dialogue with the contemporary world (2009, p. 110).

Curran's argument makes sense when Methodism is considered as an institution, since the transition from movement to church required that certain perspectives and catechetical understandings of faith and church were codified. This naturally places a greater stress on Methodism as an organisation. However, Methodism does not only exist as a national Church, but it exists in expressions of Methodism in local church communities. "Methodism exists solely by virtue of its calling" claims Angela Shier-Jones (2005, p. 260), while this calling is fulfilled by the institution which bears the Methodist name, it is equally fulfilled by Methodist people in churches who also claim that name.

If Methodism exists as a 'work in progress' then that work cannot be limited to those who perform official functions in the life of the church or those who write the official theology or hymnody of that church. The work that enables Methodism to be explored and realised in each generation is that of the whole Methodist people, enacted locally in communities of Methodist people. Christopher Shannahan (1999) recognises this tension when he argues that, at its heart, Methodism should be considered a liberative mode of praxis, shown in Wesley's concern for the poor and oppressed, which needs to be recovered. He claims that Methodism's future may not be in sustaining the institution of the church but rather in understanding Methodism as it is revealed in practice. Methodism, he argues, should "forge a dynamic theology of liberation that begins and ends in action for freedom" (1999, p. 38). However, it is the actions of Methodist people, not simply a change in the working of the institutional church that will begin this movement. This perspective is shared by Richard Woolley (1999), who argues that Methodism must embrace the understanding and praxis of small congregations, where mutual support and friendship can enlighten their shared life. The Methodist church must, he claims, commit "itself afresh to internal dialogue and openness" (1999, p. 53). To be effective, this must take place throughout the church, the institution and the local church engaging in a relationship of mutual conversation and development, which will further the understanding of Methodism as a lived experience.

According to David Hempton (2005), Methodism grew rapidly (particularly in the American context), due in part to the way it valued the voices of 'ordinary' people.[21] In America, it was followed by the rise of Pentecostalism which was "another movement giving voice to ordinary people" (2005, p. 208). The growth and vitality of a church tradition are linked to its ability to empower ordinary people and value their voices. As the Methodist Church has suffered decline in the British context over the last one hundred years, the institution has continued to reflect on the nature of Methodism and its expression in the Connexion.[22] However, it is possible to argue that as it has declined, the Methodist church has moved away from its traditional roots where an emphasis on small groups and personal holiness expressed in classes, bands and societies gave local congregations a primacy in seeking the revelation of God (Shannahan, 1999; Woolley, 1999). Barbara Glasson (2004, 2006) argues that within Methodism there is a narrative understanding of theology operating locally, leading to a pragmatism which is embedded in the local life and mission of the church. This narrative understanding of the church recognises that "through life experience, we are constantly called to check out our foundation paradigms, assumptions and prejudices" (2004, p. 108). The Methodist tradition in a local church must be something that its adherents consider to be important, which makes sense of their context and provides them with a voice in its life, this allows its practice to become liberative.

The decline of Methodist membership is set within the larger context of secularisation, which Steve Bruce argues, accounts in part for the "decline in religion in Britain" (2011, p. 544) since the 1960s. When reflecting on the causes of decline in Christian churches, Bruce (2002, p. 235) notes that "most people did not give up being committed Christians because they became convinced that religion was false. It simply ceased to be of any great importance to them; they became indifferent".

[21] Hempton notes that the "meteoric rise of Methodism" (2005, p. 208) is hard to fully explain, he considers its decline the easier issue to consider.

[22] Hempton 2005, p.214, outlines the numerical growth in British Methodist members between 1790 when there were 26,282 and 1930 when there were 841,462, yet from 1930 membership declined in each decade until in 1990 424, 540 members were recorded. From this point membership has continued to decline, the Methodist Conference of June 2017 recording a membership of 188,000 (TMCP, 2017a).

Peter Berger (1967, p. 113) defines secularisation as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1985, p. 429) challenge Bruce, arguing that secularism is "nothing new … through secularisation, sects are tamed and transformed into churches". In his paper *Secularisation R.I.P* (1999) Stark claims that organised religions may ultimately be "relegated to memory and museums. If so, however, this will not have been caused by modernization, and the demise of faith will bear no resemblance to the process postulated by the secularization doctrine" (1999, p. 269). Consequently, Stark and Bainbridge do not regard secularism as a direct threat to churches; rather, they suggest that it encourages innovation within churches as they respond to a new dynamic context. In *Christianity in Britain R.I.P,* Steve Bruce offers a scathing response to Stark,

> When the Methodists … finally fold around 2030, when the Church of England is reduced to a trivial voluntary association … and when church attendance falls below 1 percent, will the supply-siders finally stop insisting that secularization is a myth? (2001, p. 202)

The decline in the membership of the Methodist Church is undeniable, however, it is not universally accepted as terminal in the way Bruce describes. While he does not name secularisation as the challenge the church faces, Tom Stuckey, reflecting after his year as the President of the Methodist Conference, echoes Stark and Bainbridge in stating that the church is on the "edge of Pentecost" (2007, p. 12). He suggests that the context in which the Methodist Church appears to be marginalised requires a new way of understanding the nature of the church. Stuckey comments, "the church has to lose its identity, becoming invisible within the usual norms of society before it can be reintegrated as a transforming presence within contemporary culture" (p. 11). While there are undoubtedly challenges for the church to face, I do not accept that the church must lose its identity, rather, churches are required to understand their identities as religious communities in their local context, that is, to

understand their life as a lived tradition which is meaningful to its members. Understanding religion as something 'lived', rather than just belonging to a dominant institution, allows the 'indifference' Bruce identifies to be addressed by demonstrating the value and meaning of religion in the lives of its members. I contend that a religious community creates meaning and importance within its tradition when it appreciates its lived identity in context. Understanding Methodist identity in context has the potential to be transformative, as the local experience offers a practical wisdom which can speak to the institution and allow a genuine dialogue, where a Methodism that engages more fully with the 'work in progress' of Methodist people in official offices and in local churches may emerge. The way Methodist people then express the value of lived Methodism counters the indifference and suspicion of religion which Berger and Bruce note within the secularisation paradigm.

Lived experience enables a church community to inhabit the religious tradition in which it is located. This concept, illuminated by Bourdieu's understanding of habitus, holds within it a practical logic or wisdom, allowing a community to make sense of their experience, yet permitting improvisation and contextual transformation. Bourdieu comments that the habitus, constituted in history and experience imposes "its particular logic on incorporation ... through which agents partake of the history objectified in institutions, appropriate them practically … [thus] reviving the sense deposited in them" (1990, p. 57). The habitus allows a community to activate its sense of self locally; without this, the community has no way to engage effectively with the institution. The Methodist tradition is articulated in community through its habitus, enabling the local church community to realise the 'sense' of Methodism locally. This is not given by the institution and adopted in an unaltered form; it can only be effective in community when it becomes part of the self-identity expressed within their embodied habitus. Methodism is a 'work in progress', that is expressed in the life of community and is part of a lived Methodism which encompasses the whole of the community's emplaced experience.

Experience is a key resource for lived Methodism. In his explorations, Clive Marsh (2004) contends that when Methodism attempts to understand itself and its

relationship with God, it appeals strongly to a 'religious experience' formed in the life and practice of a religious community. Marsh comments, "Methodism has maintained both a society/church ambiguity at its heart" (2004, p. 129), noting a tension in the way a local church understands itself in relation to The Methodist Church. Further, Marsh suggests that Methodism's understanding of experience *as* religious provides a way for its members to explicitly connect their experience of God with their daily living, both within the church community and beyond (pp. 129-130). This places a great stress on the ability to 'live' the theology of the church as a mark of its authenticity. The 'work in progress' of Methodist people locally is a result of the nature of the religious experience in community. This is understood as 'Methodist', or at least labelled Methodist as a result of the church claiming that title.

To explore the nature of Methodist tradition, I suggest it is helpful to consider the way tradition enables religious experience in place. To that end, I use the work of Daniel Batson and Larry Ventis (1982) who offer differing 'ways' of being religious: 'extrinsic', 'intrinsic', and 'quest'. In my research, these categories are recast to understand the way in which the Methodist tradition functions. The 'extrinsic' model, is utilitarian because the value it ascribes to religion is in its usefulness to an individual. Religion is useful for gaining status and endorsement for a particular way of life, for instance a person attending a church "because it was 'good for business'" (Batson and Ventis, 1982, p. 140). The 'intrinsic' model regards faith as a value in itself which gives meaning and motivation to life (pp. 140 - 141), this may be seen in a person who claims "my whole approach to life is based on my religion" (Darvyri, Galanakis, Avgoustidis, Pateraki, Vasdekis, and Darviri, 2014, p. 1564). The extrinsic and intrinsic modes are not mutually exclusive because there may be aspects of religious experience which fit into both. 'Quest' addresses difficult existential questions, which may not be answered, offering a question orientated focus to the religious life (Batson and Ventis, 1982, pp. 149 - 152). The quest mode draws on elements of an intrinsic and extrinsic understanding, recognising that the religious experience is never complete. A religious experience in the questing mode is characterised by a commitment to "open-ended dialogue" (1982, p. 150).

The questing model is often understood as liberating, as it allows faith to be explored and to develop freely, yet this does not create a "safe space" (p. 46) for faith to be expressed, as a religious experience will always bring challenge and questions. In each church community, there is a diversity of belief which is reflected in a questing mode, allowing for a personal way of believing to emerge, and equally, a personal way of understanding a religious experience (p. 46). Those experiences, therefore, are understood differently from one community to another; a questing model can enable the way tradition is understood locally to be appreciated. Within this quest mode, however, the extrinsic and intrinsic modes of religious experience still have a function in articulating elements of tradition.

In my research, the intrinsic mode provides a way for the local tradition to be noticed, rooting the shared experience of the local church's life; I refer to this mode as the local tradition. The extrinsic mode provides the official Methodist interaction with each community through its representatives and 'guardians' of the official tradition; here I refer to this as the received tradition. The quest mode operates as the place where the local tradition and the received traction interact to create a new contextual Methodist tradition. This is where the value of the Methodist tradition is apprehended in the local context of each church, which by its nature will be different in each church community. As the church communities develop their identity and theology through their 'work in progress', there is an ongoing quest to live within the tradition that is created, and to allow that tradition to be in dialogue with the continuing experience of the community.

7.2. A Local Tradition

The local tradition is communicated through a focus on the church community as the place in which identity as a religious organisation is nurtured and developed. It is where primacy is given to the local community as a distinct group, recognising that the experience of the local church is the place where its members realise the value of their religion.

The participants from Sonning Methodist church explained the reasons why they had started to attend their church. There were a variety of reasons: some were brought

to the church as children; others were brought up as Methodists and joined the church when they came to live in the village because it was Methodist; and still others felt it was the 'right' local church to join. In the group, the choice to deliberately become Methodist was not very common, instead it was the family church or the 'right' local church which takes precedence. Clive Marsh (2004, p. 129) claims,

> a crucial test of the adequacy of any theology is whether it can be lived: does it help me in my relations with my children, will it make me a better co-worker?

Certainly, lived experience is used to form a sustainable theology, and providing benefit in the lives of its adherents is vital, but it is not that which primarily enables people to enter faith communities. Rather, it is the relationships in the churches that are more important, this was shown in the importance of 'welcome' discussed in Chapter Six. In 1992, John Finney conducted research with a "random sample of churches [who were asked to give] the name of those aged sixteen or over who had made a 'public profession of faith in the last twelve months' (1992, p. ix). Finney concludes there are several factors that are essential to the acceptance of Christian faith for his participants. The primary and secondary factors depend upon relationships. The influence of a spouse or partner, children, parents, other family, Christian friends, or Christian lay people are significantly higher on both lists than any evangelistic events or church activities where theology might be overtly communicated (1992, pp. 35 - 38). The place of relationships leads Finney to comment, "the personal is much more significant that those factors that do not involve direct contact with people"(p. 38). When discussing the choice to attend a church in my research, it is the same case, the value of becoming part of the church is seen in the relationships in the community. The value of the local tradition is known through the experience of relationships with the people who embody that tradition.

Elaine, who had moved from an Anglican church, felt that Sonning Methodist was the right church for her to go to, "It just gives you a much more comfortable feeling ... to me the focus is on relationships". Elaine had not intentionally sought a Methodist church; she had gone to the church that "suited her" in terms of the style of worship and feeling of welcome she experienced. The desire for church that 'suits' is shared by others in the group interviews; Barbara came to the church because of a relationship with a friend, but within the community of Ripley Methodist she was valued, and 'allowed' to be involved in the leadership of the church, which became crucial. "There's lots I've been able to do here that I couldn't have even dreamt of doing within ... evangelical churches … because I'm a woman". Evelyn also speaks of the roles she fulfilled in the church, but rather than choosing her church she was taken to the church by her parents, "I just grew into it ... Sunday School scholar, Sunday school teacher, in the choir at fifteen, and the treasurer of the choir at fifteen and so on". Evelyn 'grew' into her place in the community rather than choosing to be Methodist. Roles and relationships sustained her identity as a person of faith in that place, expressing what Zurcher (1977) calls the social mode of identity formation, where an individual's sense of self is centred around their role and status in community. When Evelyn was able to fulfil her roles, she understood the personal value of the local tradition. This also clarifies her sense of being a "spare part" when she was unable, due to age and her diminishing ability, to fulfil those roles any longer.

Simon, who had a religious experience in the Sonning Methodist church building, which he described as going out of his own sense in the church prayer room, values the local tradition in which he and his faith had found expression. Whether his church was Methodist or otherwise is incidental, the tradition he values is the location of his religious experience. Simon has become comfortable with 'his' church, "[on] Remembrance Sunday ... we didn't go to church that morning, it seemed as though there was something missing". He gives the highest value to the tradition through which he interprets his own religious experience, "it's just [your] total life int [sic] it?" For Simon, that life is in the local tradition. Angela Shier-Jones (2009), points out that the understanding of 'local' is not as simple as it may seem, local does not only refer to geography, it refers to "spheres of influence" (2009, p.

202) where a person can effect change through a role or function. These may be areas in which an individual is able to fulfil functions denied to them elsewhere, as in the case of Barbara, "it wasn't anything to do with being a Methodist church it ... [was the] fellowship of the people here, and feeling needed", or where their religious identity is sustained as in the case of Simon. In both cases, it is the local sphere of influence in the church that is important.

When Jenny, who had previously belonged to a United Reformed Church, was asked what kind of tradition she was looking for, she comments, "we went to all sorts of various places to find where God was wanting us to be". When she joined Sonning Methodist, she made a commitment to the local church, not to Methodism. Jenny attends the church and as she says, "I just volunteer where needed", noting "well I was made a member so, you know, I've made a commitment … to the fellowship". The Methodist understanding of membership reflects its origins as a movement with local societies, and later a transition to a national Church. It is an acknowledgement of belonging within The Methodist Church, expressed through a local church community (TMCP, 2017b). Jenny, however, positions her belonging in the local tradition, expressed in Sonning Methodist Church community. She recognised that the transition from one church to another was not easy for her,

> I found it difficult at first, but Andrew was really comfortable there [in our previous church] ... [but] I really feel that is where God really wanted us to be ... it's taken a lot of getting used to.

Jenny speaks of searching for the 'right' church for her and her husband, basing her decision on the 'feel' of that church, and her belief that it was where she was "meant to be". It is, therefore, the local tradition and the local experience that Jenny prioritises in choosing a church. When Philip Drake (2004) discusses membership in the Methodist church he recognises it is a complex issue as the societal origins are further removed from the present experience, and the place of baptism in affirming belonging within the wider church raises challenges whether the concept of

membership is necessary in the life of the church. Drake observes, "there are those who, in these 'mix-and-match' days of post-denominationalism, simply look for a church that suits them and show little regard for formal systems of membership" (2004, p. 133). Jenny's regard for membership offers a different perspective to Drake, as her desire for membership is about valuing the local church.

The intrinsic understanding of religious experience confers "a kind of personal freedom" which creates a "strong faith to live by" (Watts et al., 2002, p. 46). Batson and Ventis refer to this kind of religion as "an active, directing force" (1982, p. 141) which provides a "master motive" (p. 144) in life. In this research, I understand the intrinsic mode in relation to the local sphere of the church; it is the local tradition that provides the context for the driving force to be realised. Anna, from Ripley Methodist, states "I keep coming because I love the place, I love the atmosphere I love the people that come along". The atmosphere of the community created by the people of the church is positive and shows how it is valued as a place where tradition is formed and expressed. The 'atmosphere' of the church, or what Bourdieu describes as its '"feel for the game" (1990, p. 66), enables a local understanding of tradition to be created.

When the participants from Sonning Methodist were asked to consider the place of their church within Methodism, Rebecca, the Senior Steward, believed that her church had little interest in the Methodist Circuit, "in our church … I don't think they're circuit-minded are they ... mention circuit and some shut down". Jenny is clear in the way she prioritises the local "I don't get the circuit ... I get my own church, [but] because I'm not Methodist ... I don't get it". Jenny claims not to be a Methodist, yet she is a member of the Methodist Church. In her mind, she belongs to *a* Methodist church rather than *the* Methodist Church. This conversation leads Rebecca to consider the impact of Methodism on the local church, "I think we're less Methodist and less 'chapel' now than we used to be, I think we're broadening". For Rebecca, the power of the local church to define itself has grown, and the external 'Methodist' influence has lessened. This is not presented as negative, rather it allows the local church tradition to exert itself without feeling hampered by 'being Methodist'.

In the light of discussions which privilege the local tradition, Sonning Methodist Church and Ripley Methodist Church both find trying to describe what made their church 'Methodist' to be challenging. Elaine comments "it was founded as a Methodist Church, wasn't it? Am I right ... it just *is* a Methodist church". Barbara echoes this thought from Ripley, "because it is. It says Methodist church outside". In these fragments, the local church seems to appreciate Methodist identity as a 'label' rather than that which drives identity and practice. Anna questioned what it is that makes a church Methodist, "this church isn't all Methodist, is it? Because we've got people from other churches, so if church is the people, it's not Methodist". Anna understands that the members of the local church form its way of being, which is their local tradition. The church may be formally Methodist, but in this understanding, the local tradition holds sway in the church's expression. In 1937, four years after Methodist union had brought several Methodist traditions together, Henry Bett voiced a concern that in the union process "spiritual unity is continually confused with organic union" (1937, p. 238). Bett argues that Methodist union had not, and could not, impose spiritual unity because each local congregation naturally has a different character (pp. 237 - 249). This differing character reveals that while Methodism is not always a unifying force, it interacts with the local experience of church. Methodist union did not create new Methodist practice across the Connexion, rather it acknowledged that the different traditions and practices of local church communities would be held together under the Methodist name. The local tradition was not dismantled by Methodist union but allowed to exist within the broader Methodist movement.

The local tradition is constructed through the work of the members, the church develops a sense of identity and belonging through relationships and 'feel' rather than through a direct appeal to Methodism. The official Methodist tradition is not, however, absent from these congregations, its presence is revealed through those who represent that tradition in the life of the local church.

7.3. A Received Tradition

Official Methodism influences the communities I studied as a received tradition held by certain members of the churches, who are part of larger Methodist narratives and

it is valued within the local community. The received tradition acts as an extrinsic religious influence within the local understanding of church.

When considering the style of worship at Sonning Methodist, Rebecca asks, "don't you think though, all the churches are coming closer to being … the same style in worship?" The group agreed, yet when they were asked if they felt they would lose their identity if they had to amalgamate with the local Anglican church, the group was clear that they would. "You'd just be swallowed up" Elaine commented, Brenda added to this "because of their rules and regulations, they couldn't alter it so you either take it or leave it", and Rebecca noted, "John Wesley would disappear right out of the window". The group was most concerned about their local Methodist tradition being 'swallowed' if they had to merge with another church. Despite the members of the church forming its local tradition, there was another influence on the life of their community. Consequently, a complicated understanding of Methodism begins to emerge, where the local tradition is not sufficient alone to sustain the church community. Despite a belief that the churches are becoming more alike, the group believed that 'something Methodist' would be lost in an amalgamation, this was not easy to articulate for the three churches. The participants attempted this when considering the question "what makes a church Methodist? Elaine questioned "It's built more on preaching, isn't it the Methodist church ... John Wesley was a preacher, hence the preaching?", Brenda asked, **"**wasn't it born in song?" Both preaching[23] and hymnody[24] may be understood as 'Methodist' parts of the church because the Methodist circuit provides a preacher, and the Methodist Connexion authorises a hymn book. They are, therefore, part of the received tradition which the church appropriates within its life. I understand the official hymnody and the preachers appointed by the circuit as extrinsic aspects of the religious experience for each community as they are 'given' to the local church

[23] Gordon Wakefield (1999, p. 51) remarks that "Methodist spirituality was undoubtedly influenced by the cult of the pulpit", and Thomas Albin (2010, p. 285) notes that within Methodism "the sermon became the primary place for the work of evangelism and the Christian instruction of believers".

[24] Judith Maizel-Long (2004) discusses the significance of hymns in the history of Methodism, most notably because they were how Methodists learned doctrine and became the liturgical response of congregations in acts of worship.

by a group who operate beyond it. Batson and Ventis (1982, p. 140) describe the extrinsic mode as something "used for self-serving ends", or as Watts, Nye, and Savage (2002) claim, it is to be found in "the appeal of the external social opportunities church going gives". As the groups consider their life, the extrinsic official Methodism provides a connection to a national ecclesial identity.

In Sonning Methodist, Rebecca explores how Methodism influences the life of her local church, "you've got to follow Methodist doctrines haven't you?" The doctrines that Rebecca speaks of are not immediately clear, and these are not explicit in the doctrinal standards of the *Deed of Union* which formed the Methodist Church from its separated denominational groups. The *Deed of Union* states the Method church "rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation" (TMCP, 2017b, p. 213). In the group interview from Ripley Methodist church, Richard, who is the Superintendent Minister of the Methodist Circuit, explains what he values in Methodism,

> for me it's important ... there is room for everybody who is … struggling towards an understanding of God and Jesus ... rather than being able to sign up to something before we let you in. So that the first emphasis for me ... is welcoming people in and then we start from there, rather than actually having ... a barrier at the door.

In valuing the 'accepting' and 'broad' church, Richard is defending the Methodist Church, beyond his local understanding. Thomas Langford claims that despite significant theological reports since 1932 and the preparation for two union schemes with the Church England in 1969 and 1972, which provided opportunities to clarify the nature of Methodism,

> there is still theological diversity among Methodists ... at one end of the spectrum … questioning of the viability of inherited theological formulations … [and at the other] a reaffirmation of the classical tradition (1998, p. 78).

It is therefore complicated to outline precisely what official Methodism 'looks' like at a local level, yet in my research, it is not seen simply as an imposed theology, rather it is located within those who represent 'official' Methodism in the church. Rebecca comments, "you have the ministers ... so presumably what you present to us *is* Methodism". She understands that the official Methodist tradition is mediated through the official representative, locating the received tradition in the life of the community. I had not imagined myself functioning in the way Rebecca describes. The role of a Presbyter in the Methodist church is understood as one of "representativeness" (Griffiths, 2002, p. 15) within the life of the local Methodist circuit. Rebecca however, extends the notion that the Presbyter represents the whole Methodist Church (TMCP, 2002) by claiming that it is through the Presbyters that official Methodism enters the church community. In my research, those who are the representatives of official Methodism do not merely represent it but deliver and defend that official Methodist tradition in a local context. Jane Leach (2002) argues that as official and authorised ministers of the church, the Presbyter stands in the liminal space "between the now and the not yet" (p. 25). This means others have "someone to be with them in the gap ... able and willing visibly to live their life and audibly to articulate their questions" (p. 26). The presbyter embodies the faith of the church, to enable others to see the lived quality of that faith, Leach refers to Sheryl Anderson's[25] (in Leach, 2002, p. 27) thoughts on the place of a Presbyter in conducting funerals, she writes "conducting a funeral is not just leading a service; more it is about standing in the place between life and death and guarding the gateway". The ministry of a Presbyter calls others to look beyond the immediate and local perspectives where faith is expressed, as one who 'guards the gateway' in the

[25] Sheryl Anderson's reflections are unpublished and therefore only accessible through Leach's work as part of a paper Anderson wrote during her training as a Methodist Presbyter.

challenges of living religion. In the Methodist tradition, the Presbyter also acts as the guardian for the local expression of the official tradition. *What is a Presbyter?* explains:

> all Methodist ministers (presbyters) who are ordained and in full connexion are thereby authorised by the Conference to be public people who represent God-in-Christ and the community of the church (particularly the Methodist Church and its Conference) in the world (TMCP, 2002).

In my research, this guarding of the tradition is not simply a representative function, it is the way the received tradition speaks into the local context: as Rebecca noted it *is* Methodism.

The narrative of place communicates the daily experience of the local church, and the interaction of various Presbyters and Local Preachers within it. This interaction reveals a picture of lived Methodism in the churches I have studied, official Methodism has a place and purpose in the lives of participants from the three congregations. Richard explains how he values the Methodist Connexion as a broad church when Barbara, the manager of the Ripley Playhouse, replies "if ... being part of Connexion means you follow the commands from above then no [we don't consider it important] because we see ourselves as a democratic ... society". Richard responds,

> that's not what the Connexion has ever tried to be … it's about being connected to, not being ruled by … we are a part of something bigger ... there is pooled experience, pooled knowledge.

When he attempts to define 'Methodist doctrine', Richard refers to the works of John Wesley,

> it's Wesley on the catholic spirit basically ... and the famous phrase from in that is "if your heart is with my heart, then give me your hand" and that really, is what we're saying.

The *Forty-Four Sermons* of John Wesley are one of the foundational documents of the Methodist Church (TMCP, 2017b). Richard uses Wesley's sermon to define Methodist doctrine because it demonstrates his understanding of a part of the Methodist tradition which would perhaps be unfamiliar to the other members of the group. He acknowledges this point himself, when discussing the way Ripley Methodist Church became a Fresh Expression,

> our doctrines are supposed to be known and adhered to and preached ... and that ... goes back to Wesley and his notes on the New Testament, but most people wouldn't know half of that.

Richard recognises his place in defending the official Methodist tradition within the life of the local church. Mick, a retired Methodist minister, also demonstrated the importance of the received tradition. When he explored why he came to be part of Eltham Methodist Church, he explains that the community was more important than the building.

> The building doesn't hold the same ... effect on us ... as a Presbyter, the fact is that when I was received into full connexion at Conference, and then I was ordained that means I, in the whole world ... operate as a Methodist minister.

Mick recognises that his place is in a Methodist worshipping community because he is a Methodist minister, who brings the received tradition into that community.

The pilot study I completed was with a group from a Methodist church in Cumbria, Watling Methodist Church is a small rural church with twenty members who had no connection to the three primary research locations. In that church, the received tradition was active through a Local Preacher who spoke in defence of the official Methodist tradition. In the group interview, Alan acted as the guardian of the received tradition in the church. In a similar way to Richard, Alan defends the 'broad' nature of the church "we're a very open denomination ... so, we're not fussed ... as long as you don't preach anything contrary to Methodist doctrines". Later in the conversations when considering the value of the Methodist Connexion locally, Alan remarks:

> it does an awful lot, in that it doesn't interfere ... we don't actually have to seek permission for anything much ... we have CPD on shelves ... we have a synod for the district; we have an annual conference for the connexion, representatives go from the district.

Alan's role as a local preacher connects him to a Methodist narrative beyond the local which allows him to function as a representative of that tradition in the church.

In the group interview from Eltham Methodist, Gill asks, "isn't there something within the Methodist Church that tests what you believe, before you are allowed to get in a pulpit and say something?" and Sue, a Local Preacher immediately responds, "there is!" The local preacher defends the official tradition of the church, this is not simply the role of the ordained Presbyter but those whose identity is held in the broader Methodist narrative. Donald English (1995, p. 4) comments that Local Preachers are a "reflection of both the condition and background of our congregations ... since they are drawn from those very congregations", and therefore

have been a “strongly unifying element” (p. 5) providing a link between the local and Connexional church. The leadership role of Local Preachers within a church or circuit has historically been understood in terms of the additional offices and responsibilities rather than by virtue of being a Local Preacher (Lampard, 1995). However the Methodist Conference of 2017 accepted that Local Preachers should be understood as leaders, in respect of training they are required to undertake, within the Methodist Church (TMCP, 2017e). The Methodist Council had been asked to consider Local Preachers as leaders after questions were raised through a memorial to the previous Methodist Conference, after consideration, it affirmed the position (TMCP, 2017c). Local Preachers are part of the official Methodist tradition and carry that into their interaction at a local level along with ordained colleagues.

In each of the three church communities, and in the pilot project, the presence of the received Methodist tradition is visible; it is mediated by those whose Methodist identity is held in a larger narrative that the local church. In Sonning Methodist, Rebecca points to the minister as the one who delivers ‘Methodism’ to the church; as Presbyters, Richard and Mick offer a defence and advocacy for the Methodist tradition, as do Alan and Sue as Local Preachers. The received Methodist tradition is offered to the local church through those members of the broader Methodist narrative, who function in this context as guardians or gatekeepers of the tradition. However, the Methodist tradition is not in an oppositional relationship between the local intrinsic and received extrinsic traditions, there is a third mode where these understandings of tradition interact creatively.

7.4 A Contextual Methodist Tradition

In my research there is a local tradition in place which interacts with the received tradition to create a dialogical space in which a new contextual Methodist tradition emerges. Batson and Ventis outline “quest” (1982, pp. 149 - 151) as a third way of being religious, this mode involves facing questions of context, and seeking a way to live authentically within a particular religion. This allows people of faith the freedom to “explore and develop” (Watts et al., 2002, p. 46) that faith in their context. In this section I will use the notion of quest to understand how a contextual Methodist

tradition is formed through the continual interaction of local and received traditions, which develop in the life of a Methodist church.

In *An Introduction to Pastoral Care*, Charles Gerkin (1997) traces the history of different 'eras' of pastoral care concluding with the suggestion that pastoral leadership must clearly and intentionally develop a 'quality of interpretive guidance' (1997, p. 114). Gerkin claims there is a tendency in Western culture to understand ministry as a 'collection of specialised functions' (p. 115), and his response to this suggests the image of the leader in a church as an 'interpretive guide'. This, he argues, offers a sense of coherence to the various functions of a leader, acting as a 'master function' to them all (p. 116). Gerkin's interpretive guide is imagined as functioning in the dialogical space between the story of the Christian community and the life stories of those related to that Christian community (pp. 111-112). In my research, an interpretive guide is the one who facilitates the dialogue between the official Methodist story and the story of the local community. Those who act as guardians of the official tradition also function in enabling that dialogical space to emerge.

In Sonning Methodist Church, Elaine discusses the way a contextual tradition is formed,

> I love the fact that we've got sermons going on every week and not necessarily by the same person, and they can preach on the same topic, and you can get a different perspective on it.

The preacher, who is provided by the Methodist circuit, is integrated into the local community relating as preacher and congregation, the local and received modes of tradition collide and create something new, where both are granted the potential to develop.

The Ripley Methodist Church participants explored how Methodism had enabled the Church's Fresh Expression project. They were not initially convinced that Methodism

was responsible for the development of the work, except for Richard who said, “that Methodism and Methodist ethos, enabled it in a way that others might have struggled ... Methodism can enable these things without actually ... coming directly out of Methodist doctrine”. This allows Barbara, the project manager, to explore a new perspective,

> Methodism has allowed [it], whereas other denominations wouldn't because of [their] view of, women and leadership. So, if you're looking at the doctrine of Methodism being inclusive and … allowing all to ... flourish … then yes, that has happened here … because most of it is women running it.

Richard allows the group to see the way official Methodism had interacted with the local, creating a ‘Methodist ethos’, in which Barbara was enabled to take on a leadership role. This creates a contextual Methodism, which is both local and received. Barbara comments that in practice “the spirit of Methodism is happening”, this is the result of dialogue between received and local which forms the contextual ‘spirit’ of Methodism, in ‘our’ place. Eltham Avenue participants recognised that the Methodist tradition has an effect on their church, but it was hard to pinpoint its impact on the life of the church. The reason for this difficulty was explained by the group’s feeling that they “just get on with being church”.

The Methodist tradition has become a contextual reality and part of the community’s habitus through their lived experience. Esther Shreeve (2002) argues that a Methodist Presbyter’s ministry cannot be adequately accomplished by presbyters alone, rather, as *What is a Presbyter* (TMCP, 2002, para 7), notes it would ideally “come to full realization when [the ministry of] the ordained and ... of the lay interact”. To understand the way the contextual tradition is formed, I extend Shreeve’s notion to include all those who offer a ministry within a broader Methodist narrative. In my data it is Presbyters and Local Preachers who take part in the group interviews, but it would properly include Deacons and certain forms of authorised

Lay Ministry. Those ministries are fully realised in the interaction with the local church, where those who are part of other Methodist narratives facilitate the dialogical process between the received and local tradition, allowing a contextual Methodist tradition to be realised and lived.

In attempting to negotiate the tension between the story of the Christian community and those connected to it, Gerkin's interpretative guide may adopt a propositionalist mode of pastoral care. This suggests there are certain truths in any situation which seek the common core of religious experience and promotes them in community. Gerkin argues these should be avoided (1997, pp. 106 - 107). Instead, he suggests a cultural-linguistic model where those who belong to a religion adopt 'a certain grammar, a way of speaking, an interpretive schema that structures one's understanding of oneself and one's world' (p. 108). Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus suggests that a [religious] community adopts a particular way of being in its corporate life, a "system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). This partly mirrors Gerkin's cultural-linguistic model, but in this model the interpretive guide operates in the tension between the interpretive schema and the life stories of the individuals, enabling authentic connections to be made. They are also to be responsible for enabling the continued, creative development of the stories of the Christian community and of individuals. I am suggesting that those who are part of broader Methodist narratives function in this way. Within the habitus of a community they enable authentic connections between the received and local tradition, allowing a contextual Methodist tradition to emerge. For this to be fully effective, of course, those who speak into the local must also be enabled to speak back to the institution, to allow Methodism to develop with the voice of the local churches being heard appropriately.

7.5 Summary

The narrative of place is the way that the communities in my research convey their self-understanding and the quality of their lived experience. Through their 'sense of place', a habitus is formed which locates the narrative of place in a community, holding their values and emphases, where an understanding of

Methodist tradition is revealed. There are three connected modes of tradition at work in the narrative of place. First, the local tradition prioritises the local experience as forming church tradition. It is an intrinsic understanding because it demonstrates the value participants place on their religion. Second, the received tradition is brought into the experience of the local through the representatives of 'official' Methodism. It is an extrinsic mode as its purpose is to make explicit connections between the local Methodist church and the Methodist Connexion. Thirdly, a quest mode, drawing on perspectives from each of the local and received traditions forms a contextual Methodist tradition. The understanding of tradition in community is complex, but that complexity reveals the attempt to 'live' within a tradition which develops with and is shaped by the community. A church in the Methodist tradition does not simply accept a set of confessional or dogmatic precepts; it is one which creates its own contextual Methodist tradition and lives within it.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: EXPLORING LIVED METHODISM

This thesis demonstrates that in the three church communities I have studied, being 'Methodist' is not only the result of the acceptance of Methodist doctrine or confessional statements. The structures, policy, and official theology of the Methodist Connexion do not create Methodism; instead, it is the local church congregations who enact these things, thus constituting what I have called lived Methodism. Lived Methodism exists in churches who appreciate their emplaced context and experience a continual dialogue between community, memory, and tradition, drawing on official Methodist theologies and the experiences of place. Therefore, to be Methodist is to experience lived Methodism in community.

In this thesis, I have demonstrated a new way of studying Methodism, which begins with the lived experience of Methodist people in church communities. I began with models of lived religion which consider the everyday, mundane, embodied practices of religious people as expressions of that religion.[26] I have not focussed explicitly on the practices of members of Methodist church communities. I have used a methodology which allowed me to hear how the practices and life of those communities are written into the narrative of place, expressing the shared experience of lived Methodism.

There are many significant works on the nature of Methodism, as seen in Chapter Two, but these studies tend to understand Methodism through its history, official theology, and its Connexionalism. Studying Methodism in this way reveals the characteristics of its formation and development. However, the divergence of practice and expression in local Methodist churches is not fully appreciated. To address this, I used the tools of practical theology to listen to the context of my research, hearing the voices of my participants from three Methodist congregations. Jane Leach (2007) argues for the necessity of attending to context in theological

[26] Ammerman, 2007; Hall, 1997; Harvey, 2013; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2002; Vanhoozer, 2007.

reflection, and Emmanuel Lartey (2000) recognises that person-in-community (2000, p. 135) forms a theological response, not the practitioner alone. Using these perspectives, I addressed my questions of local Methodist identity and expression by starting with the experience of the three congregations, and so I enabled a narrative of place to be communicated.

8.1 Summary

This project began with questions from my formative experience within The Methodist Church and subsequent practice as a Methodist Presbyter with oversight of three Methodist church communities. I asked, "What does it mean to be Methodist?" My experience led me to theorise that 'Methodism' was best expressed in the lived experience of a community who claim to be Methodist. In my research, I sought to understand the nature of the lived experience in three church congregations with whom I was working. Using a narrative research methodology, I discovered that there was a common narrative structure emerging from my work with participants from each church.

In the group interviews, place was significant, as participants constructed an account of their church life together. In these conversations, a 'sense of place', was formed in the physical space of a church community. This is invested with power in understanding and communicating identity, and through this, narratives of identity are written and enacted, demonstrating shared meaning-making. For my research participants, the lived experience of community, which is sustained and validated by shared memories, enables a way of 'being' within the Methodist tradition.

Within the narrative of place, the habitus created and enacted by each community guides their self-understanding, it is formed in community and remains unique to each context. The habitus imparts a 'way of knowing' in the shared life of the community, which allows members to reflect on their experience and incorporate new practices and perspectives within the 'rules of the game'. These rules are created in community and sustain its life, revealing a series of common emphases across the three congregations I have studied.

In each church there is an analogous way of considering the boundaries of the community, participants use the term "like-minded" which appears to create an exclusive community due to its repeated use. However, in the narrative of place, 'like-minded' functions as an invitation to participate in the life of the community. It is through participation in community life that people become "like-minded". Therefore, this does not relate to predefined theology or ecclesiology; it is a way of establishing the values of the community and sustaining its life. The influence of habitus is further seen in the community's 'feel' for interpretation, which enables the churches to become a 'situational interpretative community', who read their context through the shared experience of participation in the life of the community. This does not, in itself, sustain the community's life, because relationships provide a sense of rootedness, expressing belonging in community. The experience of the churches is one of separation from the world, as a community who await some measure of eschatological fulfilment, yet they remain engaged within the world in the practical outworking of 'church'. It is a liminal experience, a place of both engagement and disengagement from the world. In this context, the relationships of the community members in the liminal space are formed through *communitas*. This grounds the members' sense of belonging in their 'place', which is the lived experience of community.

In the narrative of place, the memories of each community reveal a rich history; these link the past and the present within an understanding of their habitus and the 'feel' for interpretation. Memories validate the shape of the community, showing the progression of the church's story. They offer a contextual validity to the church, revealing the historical location of their values, which are embedded in community life. Stories of important individuals, who show the effect of the church's life, and events that are seen to epitomise the value of the church are appropriated and used to define the 'heart' of the church, demonstrating its shared values and validity as an expression of community and church.

The three churches in this research operate in a formal Methodist context and self-identify as Methodist. Therefore, the community experience cannot ignore the presence of the Methodist tradition. Within the narrative of place, tradition is

located in an understanding of community and supported by an appeal to memory. Tradition develops as members of the community continually negotiate their 'work in progress'. There is a local tradition in which the work of the people who form the community construct the church's sense of identity within the Methodist tradition. In this understanding, Methodism is a formal expression of the enacted community rather than a governing force in the community life. In the life of the community, there is also a received tradition in which the guardians of the official tradition communicate its influence. In my research, these are Presbyters or Local Preachers, who function as representatives of official Methodism in the local communities, defending, or advocating the official Methodist tradition. Within each of the church communities, the local and received traditions interact to form a contextual Methodist tradition, where the received tradition is in dialogue with the local tradition of the community life. The result of the different modes of tradition interacting leads to the formation of a new contextual tradition, unique to its context.

Each church in this research expresses a narrative of place, which reflects on and articulates the shared identity of the community. This reveals the way they create community, activate memory in defence of that community and appropriate the notion of Methodist tradition. The practice of each church is different, and their expression of 'church' is equally diverse, yet they share a characteristic narrative style as they express their self-identity.

The participants in this research experience the life of a Methodist church; the community creates their Methodist context through their entire way of being, not only in their reflections on Methodist tradition. Therefore, the Methodism of the churches is in their lived experience. The reflections on the local, received, and contextual impact of the Methodist tradition are understood and appropriated in the light of the community's life and interpreted in keeping with the habitus it has created. Experience ensures that their Methodism resonates with the values of the church and interpretative 'feel' of the community itself. The entire lived experience of the church forms a lived Methodism.

8.2 Lived Methodism

In this thesis, I suggest a new way of studying Methodism, which privileges the local church as a place of insight where lived Methodism is experienced. Firstly, this thesis argues that the lived experience of Methodism in community offers a rich understanding of Methodism. This research has exposed the narrative experiences of participants from three Methodist congregations revealing a picture of Methodism which, while a shared experience, is expressed in distinct ways. This experience is lived Methodism, located in the contextual, community experience, and shaped by the active participation of members in the community life. Participation in community creates a dialogical space where people create and re-create 'church'. The narrative of place reveals this creative process where community, memory, and tradition interact. Narratives are created by members, who frame their stories in different ways as the context and constitution of the church community demands. If Methodism is realised as a meaning-making resource in community and a basis for church formation rather than an 'object' to be studied, it cannot be divorced from the context of the local church. The fullness of Methodism is not in the formal theology of its official statements and reports, nor is it in the polity and practices of the Connexional offices. Instead, when it is enacted in community, the fullness of Methodism is appreciated: this is lived Methodism.

Secondly, this thesis argues that the Methodist understanding of Connexionalism must privilege the experience of Methodist people in community to know itself with integrity. *Called to Love and Praise (1999, p. 59)* claims that the church has a "provisionality which it all too easily forgets". That is to say, over time, churches develop as their members share the lived experience of community, driving change and reflection through their negotiation of identity narratives. To grasp the Connexional nature of The Methodist Church, lived Methodism must be in dialogue with the theological and ecclesiological impetus of the institution.

Methodism can exist in different ways, so there will always be diversity in the practice and expression of local Methodist churches. As context continually shapes and challenges the structure and form of a local church, its practice responds accordingly. I suggest that the diversity in local Methodist churches has always existed, yet their 'Methodism' is not only held in check by the influence of official Methodism but by

the narratives and stories which shape the local church's way of being. These are local stories which shape that place; they are constructed by church members, Local Preachers, ministers and all those who are part of the community in that place. This means that place is not merely the neutral space a congregation inhabits, but the location of that shared experience, "dynamically related to the religious identity of the faith community" (Day, 2014, p. 30), and it must be taken seriously. The Methodist Church is in a context of declining membership, which brings with it the closing of churches. This research suggests that closing a church is not only the loss of a building, but the loss of place. Place aids the forming, sustaining, and communicating of identity through the corporate narratives created there. Accepting the importance of place is about transforming practice in the life of the Methodist Church and recognising place as part of the Methodist experience. It is a way Methodist people in my research appreciate their relationship with the church. Therefore, developing ways in which congregations are enabled to reflect on their investment in space that creates a 'sense of place' is essential to grasping the way a local church experiences Methodism.

As churches close and their congregations join with others, the integration of new members is fostered by recognising how the space of the 'new' church exerts its influence. It is too simplistic to assume that a congregation can move from one space to another and at that juncture engage in the life of that community or 'carry on where they left off'. The new space could become 'place' but would require an investment of time and relationship-building from its new members, as they find their place in a new narrative and understand their part in its authoring. When considering how The Methodist Church may continue to engage ecumenically, the issues of place are again important. My participants were concerned that they would be 'swallowed' up by the Church of England if they were to unite. This reflected a concern that their place would be lost, the question of theology was less important than that of identity. The fear was that the Methodist narrative of place would be lost, within the narrative of another place. Lived Methodism is rooted in the experience of place, and this must be taken seriously as The Methodist Church considers its future, locally and nationally. This may be achieved by facilitating ways

in which members of local churches can be enabled to understand their investment in place and empower them to construct new narratives together. These are, however, created through the natural experience of place rather than being forced. Therefore, discovering a way to speak about the experience of lived Methodism with other Methodists and members of other denominations will reveal shared aspects of the lived Christian experience, and the points of departure. This will allow a conversation about the value of place and begin to show how new shared narratives, which do not consume old ones but create something new with them, may emerge.

8.3 Direction for Future Research

This thesis has examined the narrative of place in three Methodist congregations, and the pilot project I conducted echoes its findings. However, whether this would be seen in other Methodist communities is uncertain. I have argued that context is vital in understanding the nature of the church, therefore it is impossible for me to claim that the narrative of place is transferable from one place to another without properly attending to context. A direction for further research is thus to consider whether the narrative of place represents a feature of Methodist church communities. If so, then its presence may reveal the nature of Methodist community formation rather than a contextual framework unique to the place of my research. A further avenue for research would be to consider how the lived experience of other Christian traditions is expressed and explore the ways this connects with, or deviates from, the narrative of place I have described.

8.4 Closing Comments

I grew up in a family that attended a Methodist church, but never really understood what that name meant, or how it connected to the experience of other Methodist people and congregations. In my practice as a Methodist Presbyter, I found myself asking the question formed many years earlier, 'What makes a church Methodist?' In this thesis, I have argued for a new way of studying Methodism that begins with local lived experience. Through this, I have contributed to the ongoing debate about Methodism by illuminating the way the participants in my research construct a narrative of place to articulate the experience of their church life. I identify the way

in which the narrative of place reveals lived Methodism in these congregations. Participants in this research answered the question 'what makes a church Methodist?' by saying "it just is", "we have a minister sent by the conference" or "it says Methodist on the sign". I argue it is much more complicated than this and demonstrate a new way to approach this question. Methodism is in the lived experience of community, where people construct narratives of place. A congregation, located in a meaning-making place, experiences community sustained by shared memory, which enables the interpretation and reinterpretation of tradition.

As a result of this work I have gained new insight into three Methodist congregations, the way they live their lives, tell their stories and create from them a narrative of place. Through recognising that a Methodist church is the place of lived Methodism, a church in which I, as the Presbyter, and a congregation live as Methodist people, and in that experience learn more of what it is to be Methodist; I can answer the question which emerged from my practice.

APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Stories worth telling: What do the narratives of three Methodist communities reveal?

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This project seeks to explore the identity of three Methodist churches. The research is focussed on three Methodist church communities. These three communities operate very differently yet are all 'officially' regarded as, and self identify as Methodist.

The research will try to discover the story of each church through group and individual interviews.

The aims of the research are to understand the story of each church, and to investigate the connections between stories of each church, ultimately to consider whether a 'Methodist' story is being told here.

Why have I been chosen?
You have been chosen because you a member or adherent of one of the three churches which will be the focus of this research.

Do I have to take part?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect the standard of care you receive in any way.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to take part in an interview with 6 or 7 other people; this will be conducted informally and is designed to enable you to talk about your church. Following this group Graham Edwards will write up the interview and create the story of your church. At this point you will be invited to another group to reflect on that

story. In the last stage of the process the researcher will ask if you have anything else to add into the research process.

You are free to withdraw from the research at any point.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
There are no disadvantages or risks foreseen in taking part in the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
As a member or adherent at the church, it is possible that you may welcome the opportunity to share and discuss your views and experiences with other people. By taking part, you will be contributing to the understanding of the nature of your church and the Methodist Church.

What if something goes wrong?
If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact:

Prof. Robert Warner,
Dean of Humanities,
University of Chester
Chester CH1 4BJ
Tel. 01244 511980

There are no special compensation arrangements for feeling harmed by this research, though if you were harmed due to someone's negligence you might have grounds for private legal action.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?
All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only the researcher carrying out the research will have access to such information.

Transcripts of interviews will be made, but all such interviews will be anonymised unless a participant request that their contribution not be.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results will be written up by the researcher, this data will be used in completing a Doctoral thesis. It is hoped that the result of this work will be helpful to other Methodist contexts. Individuals who participate will not be identified in any subsequent report or publication.

Who is organising and funding the research?
The research is organised and funded by Graham Edwards.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Graham Edwards
0919482@chester.ac.uk

Thank you for your interest in this research.

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:

Stories worth telling: What do the narratives of three Methodist communities reveal?

Name of Researcher: Graham Edwards

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated ……., for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Person taking consent (if different from researcher)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

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